

Personality, Pedagogy, and Professional Growth in Outstanding Preschool Teachers: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: This qualitative study employs thematic analysis to explore the personality traits, teaching competencies, and professional growth pathway of an exemplary preschool teacher through in-depth interviews. The participant was selected using a two-round nomination procedure: nine outstanding teachers recommended by interns from three kindergartens were initially identified, with one ultimately chosen as the case study subject. Analysis of interview transcripts yielded three core findings: exemplary preschool teachers (1) demonstrate compassion, patience, responsibility, and emotional regulation; (2) integrate child-centered design, diversified strategies, adept classroom management, and individualized guidance in teaching practice; and (3) develop professionally through overcoming challenges, leveraging support systems, and continuous learning-reflection cycles. The findings deepen the understanding of excellence in preschool teaching and provide empirical support for teacher professional development and education Strategy refinement.

Keywords: Preschool Teacher Professional Development; Personality Traits; Teaching Practice Competencies; Professional Growth Pathway

1. Introduction

Early childhood education serves as the foundation of the national education system, playing a pivotal role in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social development during their formative years. As the core practitioners in this field, preschool teachers' professional competence, pedagogical skills, personal attributes, and career trajectories directly influence the holistic development of children and the achievement of educational objectives.

While existing research on preschool teachers'

professional development has grown increasingly comprehensive—covering dimensions such as competency, professional ethics, and continuing education—systematic case studies remain scarce regarding the defining traits of "outstanding preschool teachers," the developmental processes underlying their teaching abilities, and the challenges and support mechanisms encountered in their career progression. Against the backdrop of complex educational environments and real-world teaching scenarios, investigating the individual journey toward becoming an outstanding educator holds significant theoretical and practical value.

This study employs qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, to examine the case of a veteran preschool teacher widely recognized by peers and trainees for excellence in practice. Focusing on three key aspects, the research aims to: (1) identify the core personal traits and professional qualities that distinguish the teacher as outstanding; (2) analyze the multifaceted teaching competencies and educational wisdom demonstrated in practice; and (3) trace the teacher's career trajectory, including challenges faced, support systems accessed, and strategies for sustained growth. By delving into this teacher's developmental experiences and professional performance, the study seeks to offer practical insights for teacher training, career pathway planning, and kindergarten management, while enriching the understanding of "excellence in preschool teaching" and providing empirical evidence to inform education policy optimization.

2. Literature Review

Teacher professional development has long been a central focus in educational research, primarily emphasizing the continuous enhancement of teachers' knowledge, skills, and pedagogical beliefs. In the field of early childhood education, teachers' professional development not only influences teaching

quality and child development outcomes but also significantly determines the realization of educational equity and accessibility^[1]. Existing research primarily explores three dimensions—personal traits, teaching competencies, and career trajectories—which this paper systematically reviews.

2.1 Personality Traits and Professional Qualities of Preschool Teachers

Teachers' personality traits are crucial psychological factors impacting their educational conduct and professional effectiveness. In Chinese early childhood education, emotional attributes such as empathy, patience and responsibility are important professional qualities and psychological qualities of teachers^[2]. Many studies emphasize that preschool teachers' mental health and emotional regulation directly influence job satisfaction and stability^{[3][4]}. Teachers with strong emotional management are better equipped to meet children's diverse needs with acceptance and care, thus fostering a supportive learning environment. Moreover, teachers' professional demeanor, values, and daily actions not only shape classroom interactions but also subtly affect children's social development^{[5][6]}. The interaction between personality traits and professional qualities is fundamental in shaping teachers' professional identities.

2.2 Teaching Competencies of Preschool Teachers

Preschool teachers' teaching competencies are multidimensional and practice-oriented, encompassing instructional design, curriculum implementation, classroom management, teacher-child interactions, developmental assessment, and family-school collaboration^{[7][8]}. Compared to primary and secondary school teachers, preschool teachers place greater emphasis on translating abstract knowledge into concrete, experience-based activities tailored to children's developmental levels, prioritizing contextual and interactive learning^[9]. Effective teaching practices rely on teachers' deep understanding of child development principles and their ability to adapt flexibly to classroom dynamics. Research has demonstrated that play-based learning, project activities, thematic integrated curricula, and environmental design effectively enhance

children's engagement and initiative. Additionally, teachers' skillful use of diverse instructional tools—such as books, natural materials, and digital technologies—plays a critical role in promoting multisensory participation and autonomous knowledge construction^{[10][11]}. However, some studies remain overly focused on teachers' theoretical knowledge, neglecting the value of practical wisdom and adaptive teaching, a limitation that becomes particularly evident in complex classroom settings^[12].

2.3 Career Pathways and Professional Development of Preschool Teachers

Teacher development is not a linear process but rather a dynamic system involving challenges, reflection, and reconstruction^[13]. Preschool teachers typically encounter stage-specific difficulties—such as role adaptation, emotional distress, pedagogical dilemmas, and burnout—as they progress from novice to experienced practitioners. Barnard et al. (2022) note that early-career teachers face particularly high stress in areas such as lesson organization, parent-teacher communication, and classroom management, yet appropriate support mechanisms can significantly enhance their professional growth^{[14][15]}. Research found that experienced mentors, by serving dual roles as practice guides and emotional supporters, effectively alleviate novice teachers' uncertainties^[16]. Moreover, the practical knowledge teachers accumulate through real-world teaching experiences—often termed practical wisdom—is considered a key resource for professional development^[17]. Unlike standardized training, this knowledge emerges from iterative practice and reflection, bridging theory and practice while fostering professional autonomy.

2.4 Research Gaps and Problem Statement

While existing research on preschool teachers has yielded substantial findings on personality traits, teaching competencies, and career pathways, most studies rely on quantitative surveys or singular perspectives, lacking an integrative understanding of their interconnections. In particular, in-depth case studies examining outstanding preschool teachers—combining their professional qualities, teaching behaviors, and developmental experiences—remain scarce.

This study seeks to address this gap by employing qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of a high-performing teacher, to present a holistic view of professional excellence and career progression. The findings aim to provide practice-oriented theoretical insights into the mechanisms and pathways of cultivating exemplary teachers.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Participant

This study focuses on a female preschool teacher with 14 years of teaching experience, widely recognized as an "outstanding teacher" by colleagues, administrators, and parents. Currently engaged in classroom teaching while also serving as the head of logistics management and union chairperson at her kindergarten, she demonstrates strong pedagogical skills, organizational leadership, and interpersonal influence.

The participant was selected through a multi-round nomination process. First, the researcher invited interns familiar with the teaching staff at three kindergartens (all affiliated with the same educational group sharing consistent teaching philosophies and practices) to nominate nine teachers with distinctive teaching styles and outstanding performance. Subsequently, these nine teachers and several administrators participated in a second nomination round, ultimately identifying one representative case. This peer cross-nomination approach ensured the participant's professional credibility and representativeness, reinforcing the case's typicality and research value.

3.2 Data Collection

Primary data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview protocol, designed around three themes—personality traits, teaching competencies, and career trajectory—was developed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006)^[18] qualitative framework and literature synthesis. Follow-up questions were flexibly incorporated to elicit depth and openness. Each interview lasted 1.5–2 hours, audio-recorded with the participant's verbal informed consent.

3.3 Data Processing and Analysis

Transcribed interview data were analyzed using Clarke and Braun's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis:

1. Immersion: Repeated reading of transcripts and

audio to identify keywords, concepts, and recurrent phrases.

2. Open Coding: Line-by-line coding to extract units related to research themes (e.g., coding "compassion, patience, responsibility" as core professional qualities).

3. Theme Development: Comparing and synthesizing initial codes to construct a preliminary thematic framework.

4. Theme Review: Verifying coherence between themes and raw data, refining hierarchical relationships through merging, splitting, or adjusting.

5. Theme Definition: Naming and delineating finalized themes to align with the three research dimensions.

6. Reporting: Substantiating arguments with representative verbatim quotes to reflect the participant's authentic perspectives.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to academic ethics. Prior to interviews, the researcher explained the study's purpose, data usage, recording methods, and privacy protections. Participation and recording were voluntary and consent-based. All data were anonymized to safeguard confidentiality.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Drawing on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic qualitative criteria, rigor was ensured through:

1). Credibility: Multi-round nominations for participant representativeness; iterative interview design refinements; analyst triangulation to validate interpretations.

2). Transferability: Thick description of participant context and selection process to enable cross-contextual applicability assessments.

3). Dependability: Transparent documentation of analytical decisions across all six thematic phases.

4). Confirmability: Grounding conclusions in raw data with minimized researcher bias; extensive use of direct quotes for evidence-based claims.

4. Data Processing and Analysis

This study employed qualitative research methods, collecting data through in-depth interviews to analyze the professional qualities, pedagogical practices, and growth pathways of an excellent early childhood educator. The interview data were processed using thematic analysis, which is a systematic method for identifying and analyzing patterns in data, capable of uncovering deeper meanings within complex phenomena^[19]. Data

processing involved transcribing interview recordings verbatim, followed by iterative reading of the text to mark meaning units. Initial codes were extracted through open coding and then categorized to form preliminary themes. Finally, themes were reviewed, defined, and named to ensure their alignment with the data and research questions (Peel, 2020), leading to the extraction of four core themes: excellent teachers' personality traits, pedagogical abilities, growth pathways, and core principles.

4.1 Personality Traits of Excellent Teachers

The Cornerstone of Professional Qualities

Analysis revealed that the personality traits of excellent early childhood educators serve as the foundation for their education and teaching. These traits are manifested both as professional emotions and internalized professional standards and demeanor.

Core professional qualities are crucial. The participant emphasized, "I believe that to be an excellent early childhood educator, first and foremost, one must possess compassion, patience, and a sense of responsibility." She regarded these 'three essential qualities' (compassion, patience, and responsibility) as fundamental prerequisites for preschool teachers. She also pointed out, "One must have a sincere heart, meaning to be sincere towards children, parents, and colleagues." She viewed sincerity as a prerequisite for establishing positive teacher-child and home-school relationships. Furthermore, she mentioned, "Your words and actions are actually an object of imitation for children, so you must pay attention to your own words and actions to set a good example for children," reflecting her high moral standards for herself.

A positive temperament and effective emotional management are indispensable in a complex work environment. Teachers need to be "a bit gentle" and "lively" to engage children, and more importantly, possess emotional regulation abilities. The participant shared, "Firstly, self-regulation is definitely necessary. You cannot bring negative emotions into your work or pass them on to children. Because children are very sensitive." She stressed, "One's mindset needs to be good, positive and optimistic. You will certainly encounter many unpleasant or even unfair things at work, and at such times, adjusting your mindset becomes very important." This ability aligns with research conclusions on the importance of educators' psychological well-being^[20], impacting

professional happiness and educational efficacy.

Professional image and demeanor are equally important. The participant stated, "A teacher's professional image is also very important. For example, your attire must conform to teacher standards... it should be neat, presentable, and also convenient for your work. And then there's your mental state; you need to greet children every day with a full, vibrant spirit," indicating that professional image is an external manifestation of professionalism and a means of conveying positive emotions.

4.2 Pedagogical Abilities of Excellent Teachers: Manifestation of Diverse Practical Wisdom

The pedagogical abilities of excellent early childhood educators encompass multiple dimensions, including instructional design, implementation, child development guidance, and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

In terms of teaching knowledge and skills, instructional design ability is a key focus. The participants believed that activity design should be "based on children's age characteristics and developmental needs," ensuring that "goals must be clear, and the sequence of activities must flow smoothly." She advocated for "play-based learning" to achieve "learning through play, and playing while learning." She also emphasized the innovative use of teaching aids, such as "the integration of multimedia and traditional teaching aids." In instructional implementation, "the ability to organize and implement teaching" is crucial, including how to "bring children back when their attention drifts? This is a kind of pedagogical acumen," as well as "the creation of specific learning environments" and "demonstration and guidance." Teaching evaluation integrates observation and reflection, by "observing their behavior, their expressions, and their works, and then analyzing the thoughts and needs behind them" to determine "how much the child has grasped" and adjust teaching accordingly. This aligns with findings from research on teachers' pedagogical practices^[21].

Regarding child development and guidance, a positive teacher-child relationship forms the foundation. The participant described, "You need to make children like you, feel close to you, and trust you. Sometimes you care for them like a mother, and at other times you communicate with them equally like a friend." In addressing children's behavioral issues, she emphasized, "first, one must understand why they are behaving this way," and

then "respond according to different situations." For conflicts among children, she would first "let them try to resolve it themselves" before the teacher intervenes, noting that children with special needs require "more attention and support" and communication with parents.

At the level of professionalism and collaboration, home-school communication is a core skill. The participant stated, "You need to be able to communicate clearly and tactfully with parents about their child's situation in the kindergarten, striving for parents' understanding and cooperation." When facing conflicts in perspectives, she advised to "communicate skillfully and gradually influence them, rather than confronting them directly." Colleague collaboration is also very important: "The support from colleagues is very important. Everyone prepares lessons together, discusses together, and when problems arise, we can brainstorm solutions together. This kind of team power is very strong." Furthermore, emergency handling ability, which means "calmly, quickly, and effectively dealing with" unexpected incidents, is vital for ensuring teaching order.

4.3 Professional Growth Pathways of Outstanding Teachers: Challenges, Support Systems, and Continuous Improvement

The development of outstanding teachers constitutes a dynamic process characterized by professional challenges, systemic support, and ongoing reflective practice.

Motivation and professional beliefs serve as intrinsic drivers. The interviewee's career choice was influenced by childhood teachers and pragmatic considerations, with professional identity rooted in "when you witness children's progress through your guidance, when you receive their genuine smiles and hugs—that sense of accomplishment and happiness transcends verbal description." She conceptualized early childhood education as "a vocation cultivated with dedication and nurtured with love."

Growth inevitably involves challenges and setbacks. The interviewee recalled early-career difficulties: "When I first taught nursery classes, classroom management was completely chaotic... I struggled with parent communication initially... The workload overwhelmed me... There were moments of self-doubt about my suitability for this profession." She experienced occupational burnout—"During the first few years, I seriously considered quitting once or twice due to

exhaustion"—and described feeling "deeply wronged" when facing parental misunderstandings. These experiences align with research on novice teacher challenges [22], which she overcame through "self-regulation," "seeking assistance," and emotional connections with children.

Support systems prove indispensable. Family provided "understanding and encouragement"; colleagues offered "mutual assistance and motivation" through "collaborative lesson planning and research discussions"; administrators extended "trust and opportunities" such as "recommending participation in training programs and competitions"; while mentor teachers exerted particularly significant influence—"My mentor contributed tremendously to my development"—highlighting the crucial role of mentoring in novice teacher growth [23].

Professional development constitutes a lifelong endeavor. The interviewee attributed her progress to accumulated experience, skill enhancement, participation in "municipal, district-level, and national training initiatives (e.g., 'National Teacher Training Program')", and consistent reflection—"I engage in daily reflection." She characterized professional growth as "a gradual, transformative process," with milestones including "successfully conducting my first open class" or "gaining competence in independently handling previously daunting situations." Her advice for new teachers emphasized: "Seek guidance from experienced colleagues with humility... Conduct timely post-lesson reflections... Embrace mistakes as valuable learning opportunities to accelerate growth."

4.4 Cross-Cutting Themes/Principles: The Embodiment of Educational Philosophy

Beyond specific competencies, this study identifies fundamental principles that constitute teachers' educational philosophies and action frameworks.

Child-centered pedagogy emerges as the foundational principle. Instructional designs based on "children's age characteristics and developmental needs" and daily interactions focused on "understanding why they behave this way" collectively demonstrate respect for children's agency—a finding consistent with developmentally appropriate practice frameworks [24]

The primacy of practical knowledge is evident. Key competencies like classroom management and parent communication are predominantly acquired through workplace practice and internalized through experience, aligning with

research on practice-embedded knowledge generation. The interviewee emphasized that "theoretical knowledge only becomes truly useful when tested in real classroom situations."

Continuous learning and reflection serve as growth accelerators. The teacher's commitment to "daily reflection" and proactive participation in professional development programs exemplifies lifelong learning dispositions. She described this as "keeping one's educational philosophy and methods perpetually updated like smartphone systems."

Multidimensional support systems prove essential. Emotional sustenance from family, professional collaboration with colleagues, empowering trust from administrators, and guidance from mentors collectively form the ecosystem that sustains professional resilience. As the interviewee noted, "No teacher grows in isolation—we thrive on interconnected support like bamboo shoots after spring rain."

This study constructs a competency profile of outstanding preschool teachers through interview analysis, revealing their educational philosophies and professional ethos. The findings offer significant implications for reconceptualizing teacher excellence, informing professional development programs, and optimizing early childhood policies—particularly in: practice-oriented training models, institutionalized mentoring mechanisms, and scaffolded reflective practice frameworks.

5. Discussion

This case study of an outstanding preschool teacher, employing in-depth interviews and thematic analysis focused on personality traits, teaching competencies, and professional growth trajectories, corroborates mainstream perspectives on teacher professionalism while enriching the conceptualization of "excellence" through concrete exemplification—thereby bridging empirical practice with theoretical construction.

5.1 Personality Traits: The Integration of Emotional Literacy and Psychological Resilience

The teacher's emphasis on "compassion, patience, and responsibility" aligns with scholarly consensus on core professional dispositions^[25]. These affective qualities serve dual functions: as outward manifestations of professional identity and intrinsic motivators sustaining long-term educational commitment. Her "authenticity," "gentle vivacity,"

and emotional self-regulation capacity enabled maintained well-being and efficacy in high-pressure environments—behaviors resonating with Rehman et al., (2024)^[26] findings on teachers' mental health and adaptive emotion regulation, confirming emotional literacy as a critical psychological resource.

5.2 Teaching Competencies: Practical Wisdom Embodied in Pedagogical Tact and Situational Adaptation

Her child-centered approach revealed a profound grasp of developmental principles and learning motivations. By skillfully integrating traditional aids with digital media, she demonstrated exceptional classroom management and teacher-child interaction abilities. Her keen observational skills and adaptive strategies during children's emotional and behavioral changes exemplified "pedagogical tact"—a "wisdom-in-action" that surpasses mere experience, reflecting professional insight. This aligns with Wan et al. 's (2020)^[27] assertion that teachers' understanding of learning environment design and student responses is crucial to instructional competence.

5.3 Growth Trajectory: The Interplay of Support Systems and Professional Identity Construction

The participant's professional trajectory revealed teaching as a dynamic, non-linear process. Sustained by a child-centered passion and the development of a professional identity, the individual navigated early-career challenges, burnout, and external misunderstandings. This developmental journey was supported by an ecosystem comprising familial encouragement, peer collaboration, administrative trust, and impactful mentorship from an experienced educator. This mentorship served as a critical mechanism, aligning with the findings of Hsu et al.(2010)^[28], in helping the individual overcome plateaus and fortify their educational convictions.

5.4 Synthesis: Four Principles in Action

Throughout the participant's professional development, four core principles were consistently upheld: 1) Child-centered axiology, prioritizing developmental appropriateness; 2) Practice-embedded epistemology, with insights into parent-teacher communication and classroom management emerging from contextual problem-solving; 3) Reflective praxis, characterized by daily self-evaluation that evolves methods akin to

app updates; 4) Support-network reciprocity, where growth flourishes through the convergence of professional and emotional support.

These principles were not abstract ideals but were dynamically enacted through teaching behaviors, institutional engagements, and identity negotiations, exemplifying theory-practice integration at its most organic.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study systematically delineates the defining characteristics of personality traits, teaching competencies, and professional growth trajectories through in-depth interviews with an exemplary preschool teacher. The findings reveal that outstanding early childhood educators consistently demonstrate core professional dispositions—compassion, patience, and responsibility—along with robust emotional regulation capacities and positive mindsets. They operationalize child-centered philosophies across all teaching domains, flexibly employing multifaceted strategies that exemplify sophisticated classroom management and individualized guidance. The participant's developmental journey highlights how perseverance through initial professional challenges, supported by an ecosystem of familial, collegial, administrative, and mentoring networks, facilitates sustained professional advancement.

As a case study, this research has limitations regarding the generalizability of findings from a single participant, which may not fully represent the shared characteristics of all exemplary preschool teachers. Future studies could employ multi-case designs, longitudinal tracking, or mixed-methods approaches to enhance the breadth and depth of inquiry.

Building on these findings, subsequent research should investigate: 1) cross-cultural variations in outstanding teachers' professional attributes, 2) the relationship between emotional labor and occupational well-being, and 3) mechanisms for internalizing and externalizing practical knowledge. Additionally, developing systematic support networks to facilitate novice teachers' professional adaptation warrants further practical exploration.

In conclusion, the formation of exemplary teachers constitutes an evolutionary process requiring the synergistic interplay of intrinsic dispositions, professional competencies, and external support systems. This study contributes both concrete exemplars and theoretical foundations for understanding and promoting early childhood teachers' professional development, while offering

valuable empirical insights for refining teacher preparation programs and educational policies.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by the 2025 Guangxi Higher Education Young and Mid-Career Faculty Basic Research Capability Enhancement Project, "A Study on the Mechanism of Enhancing University Students' Digital Literacy and Cultural Competence Based on Local Culture" (Grant No. 2025KY0692), the 2024 Hechi University Demonstration Course Project on Curriculum Ideological and Political Education, "Art Education for Preschool Children" (Grant No.2024KCSZ34), and the 2024 Hechi University Category A Education and Teaching Reform Project, "Technology Empowerment, Curriculum Mapping Optimization, Personalized Customization: Teaching Reform and Practice of Art Courses in Preschool Education at Local Universities" (Grant No. 2024EA019).

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