



Short Paper

Career Identity and Career Behavior of Preschool Education Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to enhance the career development quality of preschool education students by comprehensively examining the relationship between their career identity and career behavior. Utilizing a descriptive-correlational design, we surveyed 300 students from three higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province using a self-constructed questionnaire. The findings revealed that students generally exhibited a positive career identity (Mean = 3.81), influenced by personal interests, family attitudes, school education, and internship experiences. Significant positive correlations (ranging from 0.718 to 0.773, $p < 0.001$) were identified between career identity dimensions—Career Cognition, Career Emotion, and Career Will—and career behavior aspects such as Career Adaptation, Teaching Ability, and Career Pressure Management. The study concludes that enhancing career identity through optimized curricula, strengthened practical teaching, and improved career guidance can foster high-quality preschool education professionals. Recommendations include providing early practical opportunities and systematic career guidance for lower-grade students, enriching career planning courses and industry seminars, establishing a "Career Mentor-Mentee Pairing System," integrating targeted training for teaching flexibility and emergency handling, and incorporating stress management and mental health education. These findings hold practical implications for educators and policymakers seeking to cultivate competent, resilient preschool educators.



INTRODUCTION

Preschool education plays a pivotal role in the holistic development of children, profoundly influencing their personality formation, behavioral patterns, and lifelong habits (Barnett & Jung, 2023). Globally, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education, with governments and societies investing significant resources to ensure every child has access to high-quality early learning experiences. In China, the significance of preschool education has been further underscored by the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party, which emphasized the necessity to "strengthen preschool education" (Xi, 2022). This directive has been complemented by provincial initiatives, such as Jiangsu Province's "14th Five-Year Education Development Plan," which outlines ambitious goals to enhance the quality of preschool education, including continuous training programs for rural teachers and innovative teacher training mechanisms.

Despite these efforts, the field of preschool education in China faces several challenges. Research indicates that preschool education students often grapple with issues such as low salary levels compared to their primary and secondary counterparts, leading to unstable career awareness and unclear development paths. Furthermore, factors like personal interests, family attitudes, school education quality, and internship experiences significantly influence students' career identity, which in turn affects their academic performance and future career decisions (Anyango et al., 2024). These challenges highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the current status of preschool education students' career identity and behavior. Faced with these challenges, this study aims to formulate an action plan to improve the quality of career development among preschool education students. By conducting a systematic exploration of the current status and correlation mechanism between career identity and career behavior, the research seeks to identify key factors influencing students' professional growth.

Specifically, the study will utilize a questionnaire survey method to gather empirical data from 300 preschool education students across three higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province. The findings will inform the development of targeted strategies, including optimizing the curriculum system, strengthening practical teaching, and improving career guidance services, to enhance students' career identity and guide positive career behaviors. Ultimately, this research endeavors to contribute to the cultivation of high-quality preschool education talents and the advancement of the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career identity and behavior are pivotal elements in shaping an individual's professional journey, particularly within the educational sector (Ling et al., 2021). These constructs not only influence career choices and motivation but also significantly impact mental well-being and professional demeanor. A robust career identity fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, guiding individuals towards fulfilling and sustainable career paths. Meanwhile, proactive career behaviors, driven by this identity, enhance adaptability, teaching effectiveness, and stress management, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and competent workforce.

Career identity in preschool education is a multifaceted concept, encompassing an individual's understanding and emotional connection to the profession's intrinsic value and societal significance (Song & Liu, 2022). Literature highlights that a strong career identity among preschool educators is associated with higher job satisfaction, increased commitment, and greater resilience in the face of challenges (Zhao & Li, 2023). Studies have delved into the factors shaping career identity, including personal interests, family support, school education, and internship experiences. The recent enactment of the Preschool Education Law in China further underscores the importance of recognizing and elevating the professional status of preschool teachers, thereby reinforcing their career identity.

Career behavior in preschool education is a manifestation of an individual's professional competence and adaptability (Lu, 2020). Research indicates that effective career behaviors, such as teaching adaptability, classroom management, and stress management, are closely linked to career identity. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations play crucial roles in shaping these behaviors, with individuals who possess high self-efficacy being more likely to engage in proactive career actions (Craig, 2021). Furthermore, establishing clear career goals during the formative college years is essential for fostering proactive career behaviors, as it provides direction and purpose, encouraging individuals to actively pursue their career aspirations (Guo, 2021).

In summary, career identity and behavior are interdependent constructs that significantly influence an individual's professional growth and success in preschool education. A strong career identity serves as a foundation for proactive career behaviors, while effective career behaviors reinforce and sustain this identity. Therefore, fostering a robust career identity and encouraging proactive career behaviors are essential for developing a competent and resilient preschool education workforce.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this paper is anchored in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. SCCT elucidates the formation of career identity and its influencing factors, highlighting the significance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals in career choice and development. Meanwhile, the JD-R Model is applied to analyze career behavior, examining how job demands and resources collectively shape career adaptation, teaching ability, and career stress management.

Building upon SCCT, this study investigates how career cognition, career emotion, and career will influence career identity. According to the JD-R model proposed by Demerouti et al. in 2001, career behavior encompasses the overall performance of preschool education students in three key areas: career adaptation, teaching ability, and career pressure management. The study explores the relationship between career identity and career behaviors, with the aim of developing effective program management models to foster the career development of preschool students, as illustrated in Figure 1.

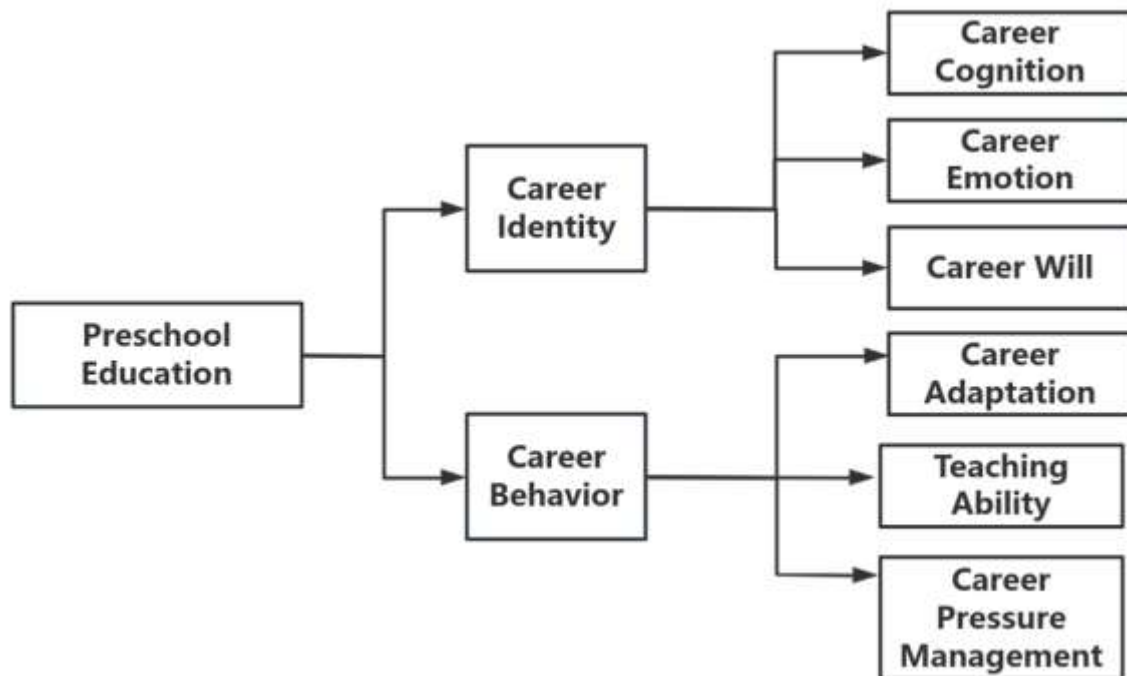


Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to investigate the current status of career identity among students majoring in preschool education, analyze the influence of career identity on career behavior, and address the following specific questions:

1. What is the assessment of the respondents on the career identity in terms of:
 - 1.1 Career Cognition,
 - 1.2 Career Emotion, and
 - 1.3 Career Will?
2. What is the assessment of the respondents on the career behavior in terms of:
 - 2.1 Career Adaptation,
 - 2.2 Teaching Ability, and
 - 2.3 Career Pressure Management?
3. Is there a significant relationship in the assessment of the respondents on the career identity and career behavior?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research adopts a descriptive-correlational design to systematically investigate the relationship between career identity and career behavior among preschool education students. This approach allows for the collection of quantitative data through a structured questionnaire, which is then statistically analyzed to identify patterns and correlations. The descriptive aspect of the design helps in summarizing the current status of students' career identity and behavior, while the correlational aspect explores the relationships between different variables, such as career cognition, career emotion, career will, career adaptation, teaching ability, and career pressure management. By employing this design, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how career identity influences career behavior, thereby informing the development of targeted interventions to enhance the quality of preschool education students' career preparation.

Participants

The participants in this study consist of 300 preschool education students selected from three higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province, China—Xuzhou Kindergarten Teachers College, Nantong Normal College, and Yancheng Kindergarten Teachers College—comprising second-year and third-year students, with a larger proportion of third-year students due to their more advanced academic stage and greater exposure to practical teaching experiences. The participants, aged between 18 and 23 years old, are predominantly female, reflecting the gender imbalance in the preschool education field, and their balanced distribution across the three colleges ensures representativeness and minimizes potential bias from institutional differences, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the study's findings.

Research Instrument

The research instrument employed in this study was a self-constructed questionnaire titled "Career Identity Questionnaire for Preschool Students," designed to comprehensively assess the career identity and career behavior of preschool education students.

The questionnaire was structured into three main sections: career cognition, career emotion, and career will, each containing several items to measure different dimensions of career identity. Additionally, the questionnaire included sections on career behavior, specifically focusing on career adaptation, teaching ability, and career pressure management. The items were developed based on a thorough review of existing literature, relevant theories such as Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and previously published instruments.

The instrument was validated through expert reviews and a pilot test with 21 respondents, demonstrating high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.845 for the Career Identity scale and 0.817 for the Career Behavior scale.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering procedure for this study involved a systematic and structured approach to collect comprehensive information from preschool education students. Initially, the researcher secured permission from the proper authorities in each participating college to conduct the survey.

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to preschool education students across three higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province, namely Xuzhou Kindergarten Teachers College, Nantong Normal College, and Yancheng Kindergarten Teachers College. The questionnaires were administered online through the Star Questionnaire platform to ensure convenient participation and data collection. To maintain privacy and anonymity, participants were assured that their identities and responses would remain confidential. The data collected were then statistically analyzed to uncover valuable insights into the career identity and career behavior of preschool education students, forming the basis for further research and recommendations.

Data Analysis

The study employed a descriptive-correlational design to systematically investigate the relationship between career identity and career behavior among preschool education

students. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 300 participants across three higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province. The collected data were statistically analyzed using measures of central tendency (means) to summarize the current status of students' career identity and behavior, and Spearman's rank correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between different variables, such as career cognition, career emotion, career will, career adaptation, teaching ability, and career pressure management. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how career identity influences career behavior, providing a solid foundation for further research and recommendations.

RESULTS

Question 1: What is the assessment of the respondents on the career identity in terms of career cognition, career emotion, and career will?

Table 1 presents the assessment of preschool education students' career identity across its three sub-dimensions and the overall mean score. As shown in the table, the mean scores of all sub-dimensions of career identity and the overall mean score fall within the "Agree" range (3.41-4.20), reflecting an overall positive performance of students' career identity, while specific differences exist among the indicators.

Table 1. Assessment of Career Identity of Preschool Education Students

Main Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Mean	Interpretation
Career Identity	Career Cognition	3.93	Agree
	Career Emotion	3.74	Agree
	Career Will	3.81	Agree
	Overall Mean	3.83	Agree

Note: 1.00-1.80=Strongly Disagree; 1.81-2.60=Disagree; 2.61-3.40=Neutral; 3.41-4.20=Agree; 4.21-5.00=Strongly Agree

For the sub-dimensions: The mean score of Career Cognition is 3.93, indicating that preschool education students generally hold a positive perception of their chosen profession. The mean score of Career Emotion is 3.74, reflecting a positive emotional connection between students and the profession. The mean score of Career Will is 3.81, suggesting a generally positive inclination of students towards long-term commitment to

the preschool education profession. The overall mean score of Career Identity is 3.83, which also falls into the "Agree" category.

Question 2: What is the assessment of the respondents on the career behavior in terms of career adaptation, teaching ability, and career pressure management?

Table 2 presents the assessment of preschool education students' career behavior across its three sub-dimensions and the overall mean score. As indicated in the table, the mean scores of all sub-dimensions of career behavior and the overall mean score fall within the "Agree" range (3.41-4.20), reflecting an overall positive performance of students' career behavior, while specific differences exist among the indicators.

Table 2. Assessment of Career Behavior of Preschool Education Students

Main Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Mean	Interpretation
Career Behavior	Career Adaptation	3.78	Agree
	Teaching Ability	3.89	Agree
	Career Pressure Management	3.90	Agree
	Overall Mean	3.86	Agree

Note: 1.00-1.80=Strongly Disagree; 1.81-2.60=Disagree; 2.61-3.40=Neutral; 3.41-4.20=Agree; 4.21-5.00=Strongly Agree

For the sub-dimensions: The mean score of Career Adaptation is 3.78, which indicates a generally positive trend in students' adaptation to professional roles. The mean score of Teaching Ability is 3.89, reflecting a solid foundation in teaching skills among preschool education students. The mean score of Career Pressure Management is 3.90, suggesting that students generally feel pressure but are managing it to some extent. The overall mean score of Career Behavior is 3.86, which also falls into the "Agree" category.

Question 3. Is there a significant relationship in the assessment of the respondents on the career identity and career behavior ?

Table 3 presents the results of Spearman's rank correlation analysis examining the relationship between preschool education students' career identity dimensions (Career Cognition, Career Emotion, Career Will) and career behavior aspects (Career Adaptation,

Teaching Ability, Career Pressure Management). As illustrated in the table, there is a significant positive correlation ($p=0.000$) between all dimensions of career identity and all aspects of career behavior, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.718 to 0.773, indicating a strong positive correlation.

Table 3. The Relationship in the Assessment of the Respondents on the Career Identity and Career Behavior of Preschool Education Students

			Career Adaptation	Teaching Ability	Career Pressure Management
Spearman's rho	Career Cognition	Correlation Coefficient	.750**	.730**	.761**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0
		N	300	300	300
	Career Emotion	Correlation Coefficient	.718**	.773**	.731**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0
		N	300	300	300
	Career Will	Correlation Coefficient	.751**	.741**	.758**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0
		N	300	300	300

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

For Career Cognition: It has correlation coefficients of 0.750, 0.730, and 0.761 with Career Adaptation, Teaching Ability, and Career Pressure Management, respectively. The Sig. (2-tailed) values are all 0, and the sample size (N) for each correlation is 300.

For Career Emotion: Its correlation coefficients with Career Adaptation, Teaching Ability, and Career Pressure Management are 0.718, 0.773, and 0.731, respectively. All Sig. (2-tailed) values are 0, and N=300 for each correlation.

For Career Will: It demonstrates correlation coefficients of 0.751, 0.741, and 0.758 with Career Adaptation, Teaching Ability, and Career Pressure Management, respectively. The Sig. (2-tailed) values are 0 across all correlations, and the sample size is 300 for each.

DISCUSSION

The overall positive career identity among preschool education students reflects a harmonious interaction between individual perceptions and contextual influences. Career Cognition, as a prominent dimension, indicates students' clear recognition of the profession's social value and intrinsic meaning, which aligns with Liu and Zhao's (2023) argument that a deep understanding of a profession's societal function lays the groundwork for robust career identity. This cognitive clarity is likely reinforced by policy advancements such as China's Preschool Education Law, which elevates the professional status of preschool teachers and strengthens students' recognition of their future career's legitimacy (Zhao & Li, 2023). In terms of Career Emotion, students' positive scores highlight their emotional investment in interacting with young children, a finding consistent with Lin et al. (2022), who noted that emotional connection to professional roles is a key driver of sustained engagement in education careers, fostering a sense of accomplishment and reducing burnout risks. However, the relatively lower score for Career Will points to underlying concerns about long-term career sustainability. As Purper et al. (2023) emphasized, practical challenges such as low salaries, limited promotion opportunities, and unstable job security in preschool education can undermine students' confidence in long-term commitment, even when they acknowledge the profession's value and experience positive emotions toward it. This discrepancy suggests that cognitive and emotional alignment with the profession does not fully offset practical worries about career longevity.

The positive performance across career behavior dimensions demonstrates the effectiveness of vocational education in equipping students with foundational professional competencies. The strong performance in Career Pressure Management indicates that students have developed initial coping strategies to navigate the demands of preschool education, which resonates with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001). This model posits that adequate personal and institutional resources enable individuals to manage job pressures effectively, and vocational colleges' integration of practical training and stress management guidance likely serves as critical support in this regard. Teaching Ability, another well-performing dimension, reflects students' acquisition of core instructional skills through coursework and practical experiences, consistent with Chen et al.'s (2023) research that structured practical teaching and internship programs in vocational colleges significantly enhance preschool education students' teaching competence. These hands-on opportunities allow students to translate theoretical knowledge into actionable skills, preparing them for classroom practice. Nevertheless, the relatively lower score for Career Adaptation, particularly in interpersonal interactions and flexible teaching practices, identifies areas for improvement. Ben-Amram and Davidovitch (2024) noted that novice educators often struggle with mentor-mentee relationships and adapting teaching methods to diverse student needs, as these skills require not only technical proficiency but also interpersonal

sensitivity and situational flexibility. This suggests that while vocational education effectively builds core teaching skills, it may need to place greater emphasis on adaptive and interpersonal competencies to address the dynamic realities of preschool classrooms.

The significant positive correlations between all dimensions of career identity and career behavior validate the interdependence of these constructs, as proposed by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT emphasizes that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals—key components of career identity—drive proactive career behaviors, and the current findings strongly support this framework. For instance, the robust correlation between Career Cognition and teaching-related behaviors echoes Craig’s (2021) conclusion that a clear understanding of professional requirements (cognitive identity) enhances self-efficacy, motivating individuals to refine their teaching skills and adapt to professional contexts. Career Emotion’s strong correlation with career behavior underscores the role of affect in driving professional action; as Ling et al. (2021) noted, positive emotional attachment to a profession fosters greater engagement in career-enhancing behaviors, such as seeking feedback to improve teaching and proactively managing workplace relationships. Career Will also emerge as a strong correlation with career behavior, aligning with Korkmaz and Yam’s (2023) research linking long-term career commitment to proactive career actions. Career Will, encompassing persistence and dedication to the profession, provides the resilience needed to navigate obstacles such as interpersonal conflicts or teaching setbacks, reinforcing SCCT’s emphasis on career goals as a catalyst for behavior. Collectively, these correlations highlight that career identity—integrating cognition, emotion, and will—serves as a foundational driver of effective career behavior, emphasizing the need to nurture all three dimensions to support students’ professional development.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the comprehensive analysis of 300 preschool education students from three higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province, several key conclusions can be drawn. Preschool education students generally exhibit a positive career identity, characterized by a clear recognition of the profession’s social value (Career Cognition), positive emotional engagement with working with children (Career Emotion), and a general inclination toward long-term commitment (Career Will). However, there is a notable gap in their confidence regarding long-term career prospects, which is closely linked to practical concerns such as salary levels, promotion pathways, and job stability, as highlighted in previous research. In terms of career behavior, students demonstrate satisfactory performance overall, with solid foundational teaching skills and initial capabilities in managing career-related pressure. Yet, challenges persist in career adaptation, particularly in interpersonal interactions—such as mentor-mentee relationships—and in the flexibility of teaching methods and emergency handling abilities, indicating areas where further skill development is needed. Most importantly, the study confirms a significant positive

relationship between career identity and career behavior. The results indicate that while students possess the basic cognitive, emotional, and skill-based foundations for their future careers, targeted interventions are necessary to address gaps in long-term career confidence and specific adaptive competencies.

Recommendations

To enhance the career development quality of preschool education students, targeted measures should be implemented to strengthen both career identity and career behavior holistically. For career identity cultivation, vocational colleges should provide early practical opportunities and systematic career guidance for lower-grade students, integrating introductory practice courses, on-campus experiential activities, and visits to high-quality kindergartens to bridge the gap between theory and practice. These experiences not only enrich students' Career Cognition by deepening their understanding of the profession's social value and practical requirements but also foster positive Career Emotion through direct interactions with children and hands-on engagement in educational scenarios. Special attention should be given to male students, who face unique challenges due to the gender imbalance in the field, through specialized career counseling and interactions with outstanding male preschool teacher role models to mitigate gender bias and enhance their sense of professional belonging across all dimensions of career identity.

Additionally, colleges should enrich career planning courses and industry seminars, inviting representatives from government departments, kindergarten management teams, and senior educators to share policy updates, industry prospects, and successful career cases. These initiatives help address students' concerns about long-term career prospects, such as salary development and promotion pathways, thereby reinforcing their Career Will while also consolidating their Career Cognition of professional development trajectories. Engaging teaching practice activities and innovative projects, such as themed teaching design competitions and public welfare activities related to preschool education, should be organized to amplify students' positive emotional experiences, deepening their passion for the profession and strengthening the interconnectedness of cognitive, emotional, and volitional aspects of career identity.

To address the identified gaps in career behavior, colleges should establish a "Career Mentor-Mentee Pairing System," assigning experienced kindergarten teachers or senior faculty to provide one-on-one guidance on interpersonal communication, workplace etiquette, and mentor-mentee relationship building. This targeted support helps students improve their career adaptation, particularly in navigating interpersonal dynamics within professional settings. Case analysis, micro-teaching, and scenario simulation training should be integrated into practical courses to enhance students' flexibility in teaching methods and emergency handling abilities, with scenarios designed to replicate common challenges in kindergarten settings—such as managing children's

challenging behaviors or responding to unexpected events—thereby strengthening their teaching ability and adaptive capacity. Furthermore, stress management and mental health education should be incorporated into the curriculum, teaching students scientific coping strategies such as time management and emotional regulation, while professional psychological counseling services and peer support groups should be established to help students enhance their career pressure management capabilities. Finally, measurable evaluation indicators should be developed to track the effectiveness of these interventions, including improvements in all dimensions of career identity, performance in teaching skill assessments and emergency drills, feedback from internship kindergartens on career adaptation and professional conduct, and students' self-reported stress management capabilities. Regular monitoring and feedback will enable dynamic adjustments to strategies, ensuring that interventions effectively enhance students' overall professional competence and employability.

IMPLICATIONS

This study enriches the application of Social Cognitive Career Theory and the Job Demands-Resources Model in preschool education by confirming the strong positive relationship between career identity (encompassing Career Cognition, Career Emotion, and Career Will) and career behavior, providing practical guidance for vocational colleges, educators, and policymakers. By highlighting that all dimensions of career identity collectively contribute to driving proactive career behaviors, the study underscores the need for holistic, targeted interventions to optimize curricula, strengthen practical teaching, and improve career guidance—initiatives that can help cultivate a high-quality preschool education workforce with strong professional commitment and comprehensive competence. Additionally, the emphasis on addressing gaps in career adaptation, flexible teaching practices, and stress management suggests that providing adequate resources—both tangible (e.g., professional development opportunities, scenario-based training tools) and intangible (e.g., social support, emotional counseling)—is crucial for supporting students' long-term professional growth and resilience. Ultimately, these insights contribute to enhancing the overall quality of early childhood education, laying a solid foundation for the holistic development of young children and the sustainable advancement of the preschool education field.

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DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest exist between the authors that might be deemed significant to the article's content.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Ethics Approval

Approval to conduct the study was obtained.

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