# A STUDY ON PRESCHOOL EDUCATION STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AT ZHENGZHOU TECHNOLOGY AND BUSINESS UNIVERSITY, HENAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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**Abstract:** This study focused on investigating preschool education students' levels of professional identity and analyzed the differences across different demographic variables. Through a quantitative research method, questionnaire data were collected. The questionnaires were adapted from the Professional Identity of University Students Scale by Yu (2015). There were four dimensions of the professional identity in this scale: cognition, affection, behavior, and appropriateness dimension. Demographic variables included gender, place of residence, major before university, intention for major selection, training experience, and work experience. The results showed that the gender distribution of students was unbalanced, with a low proportion of male students. There were fewer students from urban areas than from rural ones. It was also found that variables such as major before university, intention for major selection, training experience, and work experience had significant differences in professional identity. Based on these findings, suggestions for improving professional identity were proposed in the areas of talent training, curriculum design and teaching, and teacher team development. The limitations of the study, including the representativeness of the sample and the depth of the research method, were also discussed. Future research directions include expanding the sample, enriching research methods, and applying empirical intervention strategies.

**Keywords:** Professional Identity, Preschool Education, Preschool Education Students

## Introduction

As society became increasingly aware of the importance of preschool education, its foundational role in the national education system became more solid. High-quality preschool education was regarded as a key starting point for the all-round development of young children. It effectively promoted their physical and mental development and laid a solid foundation for future academic achievement. Studies showed that children who received high-quality preschool education performed significantly

better than others in terms of appropriateness, learning performance, and social skills (Wang et al., 2024). Therefore, the demand for high-quality preschool education professionals increased, and undergraduate preschool education programs emerged to cultivate talents with solid theoretical knowledge and rich practical experience.

Based on the theories of Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), and Farrell (2016), pre-service teachers who had training experience or work experience were more likely to develop a stronger sense of professional identity. This process involved reflective practice, where teachers consciously reviewed, analyzed, and critically thought about their teaching experiences to adjust their behaviors and construct meaningful teaching perspectives. Through reflection, teachers better understood their roles, responsibilities, and teaching beliefs, thereby forming a stronger professional identity (Gutiérrez et al., 2022). Reflective practice was therefore regarded in teacher education as a continuous learning cycle that helped both pre-service and in-service teachers improve their teaching through self-reflection, promoting personal and professional growth, enhancing teaching effectiveness, and supporting the development of teacher identity (Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021).

Society's misunderstanding of preschool education weakened university students' sense of professional belonging, simplifying it into a routine daily job and ignoring its importance in preschool education (Webb, 2017). This led to students' lack of due respect in their studies and internships, affecting their commitment to the profession. At the same time, low salaries and limited promotion opportunities made graduates feel confused and frustrated about their future careers, further reducing their professional identity (Smith & Hatmaker, 2014).

## Research Objectives

(1) To understand the demographic distribution of preschool education students at Zhengzhou Technology and Business University, including their gender, place of residence, major before university, intention for major selection, training experience, and work experience.

(2) To determine the level of professional identity of preschool education students at Zhengzhou Technology and Business University.

(3) To analyze the differences in professional identity of preschool education students at Zhengzhou Technology and Business University based on different demographic variables.

## Literature Review

### *Concept and Theoretical Development of Professional Identity*

Professional identity was a crucial part of an individual's self-identification and self-development. As research on identity deepened, the concept of professional identity gradually attracted increasing attention. Mead (1934) emphasized in his theory of symbolic interactionism that an individual's identity was gradually constructed through interactions with others. Professional identity

was formed over time through communication with colleagues, mentors, and professional groups. Tajfel (1978), through social identity theory, argued that an individual's self-concept was partly derived from the values and behavior patterns of the group to which they belonged. In this view, professional identity was a concrete manifestation of professional group identity. Additionally, Super's (1957) career development theory suggested that career choice and career development were extensions of an individual's self-concept, and the formation of professional identity was inseparable from one's career development process. Hogg (2001) further argued that professional identity involved an individual's self-categorization within a professional group. When individuals saw themselves as part of a specific professional group, they internalized that group's values, norms, and behaviors, thus forming a sense of professional identity. As attention to professional identity increased, its significance in education also grew. Teacher professional identity referred to a teacher's cognitive and affectional evaluation of their professional role, including perceptions of the importance of teaching, working conditions, and self-worth (Zhao & Zhang, 2017).

Pre-service teacher professional identity, also known as student teachers' professional identity, focused on how pre-service teachers understood their future roles. It included their cognition, affection, self-awareness, beliefs, and teaching philosophy (Izadinia, 2013). Recent studies emphasized that how teachers understood their roles and professional values was a dynamic and socially contextualized process (Lavina, 2022; Sutherland et al., 2010). Li (2024) stated that professional identity involved the cognitive, affectional, and behavioral tendencies of students toward their major. It reflected their level of understanding, interest, and willingness to invest in professional learning. This perspective emphasized the interaction among cognition, affection, and behavior, where cognition served as the foundation, affection as the driving force, and behavior as the external expression.

In summary, professional identity referred to an individual's self-perception and role positioning within their professional field. This identity included the internalization of professional values, ethics, knowledge systems, and codes of conduct, along with a sense of belonging to a professional group. The development of professional identity was a dynamic process, influenced by education, practical experience, and social culture (Lavina, 2022; Sutherland et al., 2010).

***Concept and Theoretical Development of Professional Identity***

The cognitive dimension reflected an individual's understanding and internalization of professional knowledge and values, and involved the cognitive structure of professional roles. Lammers & Atouba (2013) pointed out that the cognitive process in professional identity had an important influence on dealing with work burnout and stress, especially in terms of role adaptation within organizations. Hanna et al. (2019) also believed that the ability of university students to combine cognition with other dimensions could enhance their capacity to face internal conflicts and challenges in future professional roles. These studies showed that the cognitive dimension served as an essential foundation for professional identity, helping individuals clearly understand their professional role

positioning. In addition, Chang-Kredl & Kingsley (2014) found that students' understanding of professional knowledge was often linked to their early educational experiences. If students were able to apply theoretical knowledge in internships, their cognitive-level professional identity would be stronger.

The affection dimension measured the degree of affectional attachment individuals felt toward their profession, including interest, enthusiasm, and affectional investment. Lammers & Atouba (2013) demonstrated that affections played a key role in coping with work pressure and role adjustment. Webb (2017) pointed out, in a cross-cultural study, that affectional identification had a strong influence on role acceptance and professional confidence. Hanna et al. (2019) also found that the interaction between affection and other dimensions contributed to understanding the professional development of students. In addition, Hagenauer & Volet (2014) showed that the affectional identification of preschool education students was closely related to their enthusiasm for education, which helped increase their professional commitment.

The appropriateness dimension described an individual's perception of fit between themselves and their chosen major, reflecting their recognition and adaptability within the field. It served as an important indicator of professional competence, especially in terms of adjusting teaching strategies to different educational contexts. Williams (2013) noted that preschool education students' sense of career fit was closely linked to their confidence in teaching skills. When students felt capable of fulfilling a teaching role, they showed a higher level of appropriateness. When students felt that they were competent for the role of teacher, they had a higher sense of appropriateness. Webb (2017) further showed that appropriateness played a key role in professional confidence and role acceptance, particularly in multicultural environments where cultural differences were present.

***Demographic Characteristics and Professional Identity Levels***

Preschool education students in China usually had a higher gender ratio, with a greater proportion of females than males. For example, Renqingtashi & Basanglamu (2024) conducted a study on 480 preschool education students from two normal schools in Tibet, China, and the results showed that females accounted for 61.04%, while males made up 38.96%. Similarly, Liu (2020) conducted a survey of 1,821 preschool education students from two normal universities in Jiangsu, China, and found that the female ratio was as high as 94.7%. In terms of place of residence, the distribution varied depending on the location of the school campus. If the campus was located in an urban area, most students' residence was in the city. Conversely, if the campus was located in a non-urban area, most students came from rural areas. Regarding the overall level of professional identity, the study indicated that the professional identity level of Chinese preschool education students was generally moderate (Renqingtashi & Basanglamu).

Research showed that the impact of gender on professional identity was both culturally and occupationally specific. For example, women showed higher levels of professional identity in

traditionally female-dominated professions such as nursing and education, while men tended to have stronger professional identity in fields such as engineering (Adams et al., 2006). In the field of preschool education, women generally had a higher sense of professional identity than men, especially in the affectional and behavioral dimensions. Scholars speculated that this might be because the emotional and caregiving characteristics of preschool education were more aligned with traditional female gender roles (Chen et al., 2020; Renqingtashi & Basanglamu, 2024). However, some studies reported different findings. For instance, Liu (2020) conducted a study on preschool education students in Jiangsu, and found no significant gender difference in their level of professional identity.

Research showed that preschool education students from rural areas usually had a higher sense of professional identity, which might be related to limited access to educational resources and fewer career opportunities compared to those from urban families (Renqingtashi & Basanglamu, 2024). However, some studies reported different findings. For example, Liu (2020), in a study of preschool education students in Jiangsu, found no significant difference in professional identity based on place of residence.

Whether there were significant differences in the professional identity of students from different academic tracks in the university entrance examination has not been widely studied in current research literature. According to the survey by Renqingtashi & Basanglamu (2024), the stronger the professional background knowledge of preschool education students, the better they could understand the knowledge required for the major. However, whether pre-service education knowledge is more closely related to the humanities track or science track, or whether preschool education students who graduated from either group developed a higher sense of professional identity after receiving teacher training, remains an area with limited literature support.

Deci & Ryan (1987) pointed out that autonomous choice in accordance with personal will was an important factor influencing individuals' intrinsic interest. Studies showed that the major choices of university graduates or freshmen were closely related to their initial level of professional interest (DeMarie & Aloise-Young, 2003; Päßler & Hell, 2012). However, it was still unclear whether, or to what extent, the major selected at admission had a long-term impact on students' professional interests. Under the current university management system, many students were affected by factors such as grades, family expectations, or major reassignment policies, making it difficult for them to enter a professional field aligned with their own interests. The gap between students' intention for major selection and their actual major provides an opportunity to explore the long-term impact of major selection on professional identity. For example, Liu (2020) found that preschool education students in Jiangsu, China, who chose their majors voluntarily, had a stronger sense of professional identity, supporting this argument.

Research showed that university students who participated in internships and professional training had significantly higher levels of professional identity. Reflective activities and experiential

learning—such as classroom simulations and teaching experiments—helped students internalize professional roles and enhanced their cultural sensitivity, especially in multicultural environments. Moreover, affectional support and team-based learning opportunities could increase students' sense of belonging to a professional group (Gao et al., 2024; Kapoor & Gardner-McCune, 2019; Wang et al., 2024; Webb, 2017).

Students with work experience performed better in terms of cognitive understanding and perceived appropriateness of their professional roles, as real-world opportunities enhanced their role clarity and confidence (Smith & Hatmaker, 2014; Jackson, 2017). Practical activities also helped interdisciplinary students adapt to professional roles (Li & Boon, 2021). For instance, Xie (2021) surveyed 145 preschool teachers who had graduated from a normal university in China. The findings revealed significant differences in professional identity across different teaching age groups.

***Problems and Challenges Faced by Preschool Education Students in Terms of Professional Identity***

Among university students majoring in preschool education, their professional identity faced many challenges, which had become an issue that could not be ignored. Existing research showed that the formation of professional identity was deeply influenced by factors such as curriculum setting, social cognition, employment prospects, and the quality of the teaching staff (Beijaard et al., 2004; Hanna et al., 2019).

First, some students lacked sufficient understanding of the course content and practical applications of the preschool education major after enrollment, which led to low interest in learning. Many students only had a superficial understanding of the major and only discovered after entering the program that it included multidisciplinary knowledge such as education, psychology, and art education (Lammers & Atouba, 2013). For example, theoretical courses such as "Principles of Preschool Education" were abstract and disconnected from real kindergarten practice, making it difficult for students to apply what they had learned during internships. When studying the theory of child behavior development, students might understand the basic concepts but often did not know how to apply them in real-world emergencies. This situation led many students to believe that the coursework did not effectively improve their practical skills, thus reducing their interest in professional learning (Hanna et al., 2019).

Secondly, social prejudice toward preschool education further weakened students' sense of professional identity. The general public often regarded it simply as babysitting or playing with children, which made students feel undervalued. For instance, students frequently heard comments like "this major is just about coaxing children," while their carefully designed teaching activities were misunderstood as mere play-based interaction (Webb, 2017). These negative perceptions from the external environment lowered students' recognition of the value of their profession and diminished their professional pride.

Furthermore, limited employment prospects and low salaries were major factors affecting students' professional commitment. Research showed that preschool teachers generally received low wages despite experiencing high workloads, which left students uncertain about their future careers (Smith & Hatmaker, 2014). For example, in some second-tier cities, the monthly salary for kindergarten teachers with a bachelor's degree was only slightly more than 3,000 yuan, with minimal opportunities for promotion, often restricted to entry-level positions (Jackson, 2017). This situation discouraged students and reduced their confidence in career development, thereby weakening their professional enthusiasm

Lastly, university teaching resources and the strength of the faculty had a direct impact on the development of professional identity. Some universities had a shortage of qualified faculty and relied on outdated teaching methods, making it difficult to meet students' needs for practical training and professional growth. For instance, in some programs, one instructor was responsible for multiple courses, limiting their ability to provide individualized guidance. The lack of modern teaching tools (e.g., virtual reality simulations) and experienced internship mentors further diminished students' learning motivation and sense of professional belonging (Ruiz & Hernández, 2025).

**Methodology**

This study was a quantitative study. A questionnaire survey was conducted among preschool education students at Zhengzhou Technology and Business University in Henan Province, China, to analyze and compare the levels of professional identity among students with different background variables. During the research process, descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) were used to describe the demographic variables, and independent sample t-tests were applied to compare the differences in professional identity between different student groups. The research design included the following key steps, which were illustrated in Figure 3.1.

First, through a literature review, we explored the theories and prior research related to preschool education students, gained an understanding of the current status of their professional identity, and then proposed the research questions for this study.

Secondly, based on the literature findings, a comparative quantitative study was conducted. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used to survey preschool education students, aiming to analyze and compare the differences in professional identity among students with different demographic backgrounds. Data were analyzed with a focus on the cognitive and affectional dimensions of professional identity.

Finally, the data collected from the questionnaire were organized and summarized, and the data analysis was completed to explore the overall status of Differential students' professional identity. Based on the findings, this study proposed practical suggestions and countermeasures for improving the training and development of preschool education students.

**Results**

***Demographic Analysis of Questionnaire Participants***

In terms of gender, the number of questionnaires collected from male students was 36, accounting for 9.5% of the total sample. The number of questionnaires collected from female students was 341, accounting for 90.5% of the sample. There was a significant difference in the number of male and female respondents, with the proportion of females being 81% higher than that of males.

Regarding place of residence, 89 students came from urban areas, representing 23.6% of the total, while 288 students came from rural areas, accounting for 76.4%. This indicated that rural students made up a large portion of the sample.

For major before university, 281 students were from the humanities track, which accounted for 74.5%, whereas 96 students were from the science track, representing 25.5%. The number of humanities track students was substantially higher than that of science students.

With respect to intention for major selection, 226 students reported that they had autonomously chosen their major, accounting for 59.9% of the total. Meanwhile, 151 students indicated that they had not independently chosen their major, representing 40.1%. These results showed that the majority of students made their own choices regarding their field of study.

In terms of training experience, 173 students had such experience, making up 45.9% of the total, while 204 students did not, accounting for 54.1%. The number of students without training experience was slightly higher. Regarding work experience, 159 students had work experience, accounting for 42.2%, while 218 students did not, representing 57.8%. This indicated that students without work experience made up the majority of the sample.

***Descriptive Statistics on the Levels of Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior and Psychological Capital***

As Table 1 showed, in terms of the dimensions, the cognitive dimension had an average score of 3.34, which was considered medium. The affectional dimension had an average score of 3.56, the behavioral dimension scored 3.58, and the appropriateness dimension reached 3.52. All three of these dimensions were judged to be at a high level.

**Table 1:** The Levels of Professional Identity

| Dimension | n | M | SD | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cognition | 377 | 3.34 | 0.44 | Medium |
| Affection | 377 | 3.56 | 0.56 | High |
| Behavior | 377 | 3.58 | 0.47 | High |
| Appropriateness | 377 | 3.52 | 0.63 | High |
| Total | 377 | 3.50 | 0.44 | Medium |

1) For Table 2, the total professional identity score showed no significant difference between male (M = 3.48, SD = 0.51) and female students (M = 3.50, SD = 0.43), t (375) = 0.35, p = .728. Therefore, the hypothesis that there were significant differences in professional identity among preschool education students with different genders was not supported by the data and was invalid.

**Table 2:** Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Professional identity by Gender

| Dimension | Male (n=36) | | Female (n=341) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Cognition | 3.42 | 0.51 | 3.34 | 0.43 | 1.02 | .308 |
| Affection | 3.64 | 0.58 | 3.57 | 0.55 | -1.44 | .150 |
| Behavior | 3.50 | 0.61 | 3.59 | 0.47 | -1.06 | .292 |
| Appropriateness | 3.56 | 0.68 | 3.51 | 0.63 | 0.40 | .687 |
| Total | 3.48 | 0.51 | 3.50 | 0.43 | 0.35 | .728 |

2) As for the total professional identity score in Table 3, no significant difference was observed between urban (M = 3.48, SD = 0.51) and rural students (M = 3.51, SD = 0.41), t (375) = 0.56, p = .574. Therefore, the hypothesis that there were significant differences in professional identity among preschool education students from different places of residence was not supported by the data and was invalid.

**Table 3:** Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Professional identity by Place of Residence

| Dimension | Urban (n=89) | | Rural(n=288) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Cognition | 3.36 | 0.40 | 3.34 | 0.45 | 0.28 | .779 |
| Affection | 3.47 | 0.61 | 3.59 | 0.54 | -1.85 | .064 |
| Behavior | 3.51 | 0.56 | 3.60 | 0.46 | -1.35 | .181 |
| Appropriateness | 3.56 | 0.74 | 3.50 | 0.59 | 0.75 | .453 |
| Total | 3.48 | 0.51 | 3.51 | 0.41 | 0.56 | .574 |

3) As Table 4 showed, for the total professional identity score, the independent sample t-test indicated a significant difference between humanities track students (M = 3.53, SD = 0.42) and science track students (M = 3.41, SD = 0.46), t (375) = 2.41, $p < .05$. This result revealed that there were significant differences in professional identity between preschool education students from the humanities track and the science track. Therefore, the hypothesis that there were significant differences in professional identity among preschool education students with different majors before university was

supported by the data and was valid.

**Table 4:** Independent Sample T-test Analysis of Professional identity by Major before University

| Dimension | Humanities Track (n=281) | | Science Track (n=96) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Cognition | 3.38 | 0.43 | 3.24 | 0.45 | 2.67 | .008 |
| Affection | 3.60 | 0.55 | 3.46 | 0.57 | 2.14 | .033 |
| Behavior | 3.61 | 0.48 | 3.48 | 0.51 | 2.27 | .024 |
| Appropriateness | 3.54 | 0.62 | 3.45 | 0.66 | 1.17 | .244 |
| Total | 3.53 | 0.42 | 3.41 | 0.46 | 2.41 | .016 |

4) In Table 5, for the total professional identity score, the results revealed a significant difference as well, with autonomous choice students (M = 3.59, SD = 0.45) scoring higher than non-autonomous choice students (M = 3.36, SD = 0.38), t (375) = 5.21, $p < .05$. These findings indicated that students' intention for major selection had a measurable impact on their professional identity across multiple dimensions. Therefore, the hypothesis that there were significant differences in professional identity among preschool education students with different intentions for major selection was supported and valid.

**Table 5:** Independent Sample T-test Analysis of Professional identity by Intentions for Major Selection

| Dimension | Autonomous Choice (n=26) | | Non-Autonomous Choice (n=151) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Cognition | 3.42 | 0.42 | 3.24 | 0.44 | 4.08 | .000 |
| Affection | 3.67 | 0.54 | 3.39 | 0.54 | 5.04 | .000 |
| Behavior | 3.66 | 0.52 | 3.47 | 0.41 | 3.76 | .000 |
| Appropriateness | 3.62 | 0.67 | 3.36 | 0.52 | 4.31 | .000 |
| Total | 3.59 | 0.45 | 3.36 | 0.38 | 5.21 | .000 |

5) In Table 6, for the total professional identity score, a significant difference was also found, with students who had training experience (M = 3.55, SD = 0.42) scoring higher than those without (M = 3.45, SD = 0.45), t (375) = 2.25, $p < .05$. These findings indicated that training experience had a measurable impact on students' professional identity in some dimensions. Therefore, Hypothesis H1-5, which posited that there were significant differences in professional identity among preschool education

students with different training experiences, was supported.

**Table 6:** Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Professional identity by Training Experience

| Dimension | Had (n=173) | | None (n=204) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Cognition | 3.36 | 0.47 | 3.34 | 0.41 | 0.51 | .610 |
| Affection | 3.64 | 0.48 | 3.49 | 0.60 | 2.77 | .006 |
| Behavior | 3.63 | 0.45 | 3.54 | 0.52 | -1.06 | .060 |
| Appropriateness | 3.59 | 0.61 | 3.46 | 0.64 | 2.00 | .647 |
| Total | 3.55 | 0.42 | 3.45 | 0.45 | 2.25 | .025 |

6) As Table 7 showed, in the total professional identity score, students with work experience (M = 3.60, SD = 0.44) also scored significantly higher than students without work experience (M = 3.43, SD = 0.42), t (375) = 4.00, p < .05. These findings indicated that work experience had a measurable impact on students' professional identity across multiple dimensions. Therefore, the hypothesis that there were significant differences in professional identity among preschool education students with different work experiences was supported and valid.

***Differences in Professional Identity Under Different Demographic Background Variables***

The professional identity of preschool education students is influenced by multiple factors. When designing curriculum, guidance policies, and teacher training programs, educators and policymakers should consider students' major before university, intention for major selection, training experience, and work experience. These background variables play a critical role in shaping professional identity and ultimately in improving the quality of talent training in preschool education.

**Table 7:** Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Professional identity by Work Experience

| Dimension | Had (n=159) | | None (n=218) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Cognition | 3.41 | 0.48 | 3.30 | 0.40 | 2.50 | .013 |
| Affection | 3.65 | 0.54 | 3.50 | 0.56 | 2.68 | .008 |
| Behavior | 3.67 | 0.48 | 3.52 | 0.48 | 2.97 | .003 |
| Appropriateness | 3.69 | 0.59 | 3.39 | 0.63 | 4.65 | .000 |
| Total | 3.60 | 0.44 | 3.43 | 0.42 | 4.00 | .000 |

## Discussion

### *Distribution of Demographic Background Variables and Levels of Professional Identity*

Judging from the basic information of the sample, among the preschool education students participating in the survey, female students accounted for 90.5%, which was much higher than the 9.5% of male students. This gender distribution characteristic was consistent with the research findings of Liu (2020). Regarding place of residence, 76.4% of students were from rural areas, and 23.6% were from urban areas. A total of 74.5% of students had chosen liberal arts in the university entrance examination, and 59.9% selected their major autonomously. In addition, 45.9% of students had training experience, and 42.2% had work experience. As for the levels of professional identity, the overall score and the cognitive dimension were at a medium level, while the scores in the affectional, behavioral, and appropriateness dimensions were at a high level.

### *Differences in Professional Identity Under Different Demographic Background Variables*

In terms of gender, no significant differences were found in professional identity or its four dimensions among preschool education students. This result differed from the findings of Chen et al. (2020) and Renqingtashi & Basanglamu (2024), but was consistent with Liu (2020). It may be inferred that in the current learning environment and training models, gender has become less influential in shaping professional identity. The promotion of gender equality and equal learning opportunities in this major likely reduced gender-based differences in professional role formation.

Regarding place of residence, there was no significant difference in professional identity or any of its dimensions. This aligns with the findings of Liu (2020), but not with those of Renqingtashi & Basanglamu (2024). One possible explanation is that urban and rural students now have more balanced access to educational resources, and the wide accessibility of information technologies has narrowed the urban-rural divide in terms of exposure to professional knowledge and development opportunities.

## Conclusions

1) In light of the high proportion of rural students, schools should focus on providing additional support to these students. This could include offering professional development lectures, providing access to information-based learning tools, and addressing the gap in educational resources and information acquisition between rural and urban students. Such measures would help rural students better understand professional development prospects and equip them with the necessary tools for success in their field.

2) It is important to focus on both professional knowledge and specific content, enabling prospective students to gain a clear understanding of their major and future career prospects before enrolling. This approach can help shift the way students choose their fields of study, encouraging them to actively embrace and pursue a career as a kindergarten teacher. The survey found that many students had only a general understanding of preschool education prior to enrolling, with some being completely

unaware of the field. As is well known, students' pre-college knowledge significantly influences their career recognition. To address this, it would be beneficial to introduce preschool education lectures in middle schools for students considering this major. These lectures should cover key aspects such as teaching content, creative methods, training programs, current trends, future prospects, and the views of the new generation on preschool education.

3) The development of the teaching staff is a crucial and systematic component in guiding the direction of student development. To enhance this, it is important to actively recruit experienced professionals from the preschool education industry, who can provide students with scientifically-based, standardized theories of preschool education while offering proper guidance on career prospects in early childhood education. Teachers should be encouraged to engage in practical teaching research and integrate their findings into the instructional process, which will help improve teaching quality and strengthen students' professional identity. Additionally, introducing part-time teachers with industry experience can offer students valuable insights into real-world applications, career development, and practical case studies, thereby enhancing their understanding of professional practice and career opportunities.

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