



The Relationship Between Professional Identity, Positive Leadership, and Professional Well-being of Early Childhood Teachers in China

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Received 23/04/2025

Revised 20/05/2025

Accepted 25/06/2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: Early childhood teachers' professional status directly affects preschool education quality. This study aims to explore the relationship between professional identity, positive leadership, and the professional well-being of early childhood teachers, with a specific focus on examining the mediating role of positive leadership in this relationship.

Materials and Methods: A questionnaire survey was conducted among 386 early childhood teachers recruited through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling from various kindergartens across the country. Data were collected using the Professional Identity Scale, Positive Leadership Scale, and Professional Well-being Scale. Structural equation modeling and the Bootstrap method (5,000 resamples) were employed for data analysis.

Results: Results showed that professional identity significantly correlated with professional well-being ($r = .58$, $p < .01$); positive leadership significantly correlated with professional well-being ($r = .62$, $p < .01$); and positive leadership played a partial mediating role between professional identity and professional well-being (mediating effect 0.21, 95% CI [0.15, 0.27]).

Conclusion: This study confirms the positive relationship between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being, while revealing the partial mediating role of positive leadership in this relationship. Consistent with our research aim, these findings suggest that improving early childhood teachers' professional well-being requires a dual focus on enhancing their internal psychological resources (professional identity) and optimizing external environmental conditions (positive leadership), providing valuable references for early childhood teacher training programs and kindergarten management practices.

Keywords: Early Childhood Teachers; Professional Identity; Positive Leadership; Professional Well-being; Mediating Effect

Introduction

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in children's development, with teachers serving as the primary implementers of educational practices. Recent studies indicate that the mental health and well-being of early childhood educators significantly impact educational quality and student outcomes. According to OECD research on early childhood education quality (OECD, 2019), teacher well-being is strongly associated with the quality of teacher-child interactions and educational outcomes. However, early childhood teachers worldwide face significant challenges that threaten their professional well-being. In China specifically, studies have documented that preschool teachers experience high levels of occupational stress, symptoms of burnout, and intentions to leave the profession (Li et al., 2020).

Professional identity—the degree to which teachers recognize and accept their professional role—represents a critical internal factor affecting teachers' psychological health and professional development. Beijaard et al. (2004) conceptualize professional identity as a dynamic construct that influences how teachers interpret their experiences and derive meaning from their work. Recent empirical studies have established clear connections between professional identity and various aspects of teacher well-being. Day et al. (2006) found that teachers' professional identity significantly influences their emotional well-being and commitment to the profession. Similarly, Hong (2010) demonstrated that professional identity issues were central to beginning teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Despite these findings, the specific mechanisms through which professional identity influences early childhood teachers' professional well-being remain inadequately understood, particularly in the Chinese educational context.

Concurrently, leadership practices within educational settings have emerged as significant external determinants of teacher well-being. The concept of positive leadership, grounded in positive psychology theory (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), emphasizes creating supportive environments that foster positive emotions and capitalize on individual strengths. Cameron (2012) articulated how positive leadership practices can enhance organizational climate and member well-being through fostering positive relationships and creating meaningful work experiences. In educational settings specifically, Kelloway et al. (2013) found that positive leadership behaviors were significantly associated with teacher well-being indicators. Nevertheless, the potential mediating role of positive leadership in the relationship between professional identity and well-being has not been systematically examined in early childhood education settings.

This research aims to address these knowledge gaps by investigating the relationship between early childhood teachers' professional identity, positive leadership in kindergartens, and professional well-being, with particular emphasis on verifying the mediating role of positive leadership. To achieve this objective, a cross-sectional survey design was employed, gathering data from 386 early childhood teachers across various regions of China between March and April 2023. Structural equation modeling and Bootstrap methods were utilized to analyze the direct and indirect relationships among the three key variables.

This study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in early childhood education. Theoretically, it extends the job demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014) by examining how personal resources (professional identity) interact with contextual resources (positive leadership) to influence well-being outcomes. Practically, findings from this research can inform evidence-based strategies for enhancing teacher well-being through professional identity development programs and leadership training initiatives, ultimately benefiting kindergarten administrators, teacher educators, and policymakers concerned with improving early childhood education quality and teacher retention.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the relationship mechanism among early childhood teachers' professional identity, positive leadership in kindergartens, and professional well-being. The specific research objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the relationship between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being, and verify the direct effect of professional identity on professional well-being.
2. To explore the relationship between positive leadership in kindergartens and early childhood teachers' professional well-being, and analyze the impact of positive leadership on teachers' psychological health.
3. To test the mediating role of positive leadership between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being, revealing the mechanism among these three variables.
4. Based on the research findings, propose practical strategies and management recommendations for enhancing early childhood teachers' professional well-being, providing theoretical support for kindergarten human resource management, and early childhood teachers' professional development.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

1. Professional Identity and Professional Well-being of Early Childhood Teachers

Professional identity refers to an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies toward their professional role (Beijaard et al., 2004). For early childhood teachers, professional identity includes recognition of the value of early childhood education, acceptance of the professional role, and positive attitudes toward professional development (Yi Lingyun et al., 2012). Professional well-being is the subjective well-being experienced by teachers in their professional activities, including job satisfaction, positive emotional experiences, and self-realization (Renshaw et al., 2015).

Existing research indicates that professional identity is closely related to professional well-being. Day et al. (2006) found that the higher the level of teachers' professional identity, the stronger their



professional well-being. Hong's (2010) research also pointed out that teachers' professional identity significantly affects their professional stability and job satisfaction. However, there is relatively little research on the relationship between professional identity and professional well-being among early childhood teachers. Considering the uniqueness of early childhood education, exploring the relationship between professional identity and professional well-being in early childhood teacher groups is of significant importance.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes:

Hypothesis 1: Early childhood teachers' professional identity is positively correlated with their professional well-being.

2. Positive Leadership in Kindergartens and Professional Well-being

Positive leadership is the application of positive organizational behavior and positive psychology in the field of leadership, emphasizing that leaders inspire positive behaviors and the potential of organizational members by developing positive psychological capital, creating positive atmospheres, and promoting positive relationships (Cameron, 2012). In the kindergarten context, positive leadership is manifested in the way kindergarten directors inspire teachers' positive emotions and work motivation through positive communication, emotional support, empowerment, and capacity building (Sun Yajuan et al., 2025).

Research shows that positive leadership significantly affects teachers' work attitudes and psychological health. Hannah et al. (2009) found that positive leadership can enhance organizational members' self-efficacy and organizational identification. Kelloway et al. (2013) discovered that positive leadership behaviors are significantly positively correlated with employees' psychological health status and job satisfaction. In the field of early childhood education, with the innovation of management concepts, positive leadership as a new leadership approach deserves attention for its impact on early childhood teachers' professional well-being.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes:

Hypothesis 2: Positive leadership in kindergartens is positively correlated with early childhood teachers' professional well-being.

3. The Mediating Role of Positive Leadership in Kindergartens

According to social cognitive theory and the job demands-resources model, individuals' cognitive evaluations affect their perception of the environment and emotional reactions. Teachers' professional identity, as an important internal cognitive resource, may influence their professional well-being by affecting their perception of leadership behaviors (Sun Yajuan, 2025).

Existing research has found that teachers' level of professional identity can influence their perception of and response to leadership behaviors. Teachers with higher professional identity are more inclined to positively perceive and accept the support and guidance from leaders (Bi Chongzeng et al., 2020). Meanwhile, leadership behavior has been proven to be an important external factor affecting teachers' professional well-being (Collie et al., 2015). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that positive leadership in kindergartens may play a mediating role between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes:

Hypothesis 3: Positive leadership in kindergartens plays a mediating role between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being.

Based on the above assumptions, this study constructed a theoretical model as shown in Figure 1.

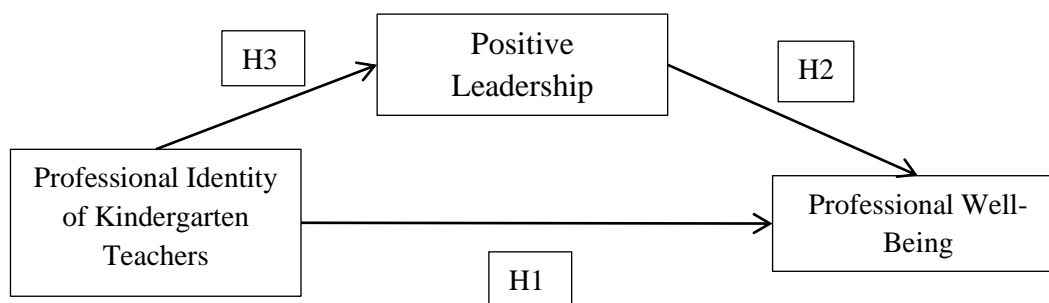


Figure 1 Constructed a Theoretical Model

Methodology

1. Research Participants

This study employed a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods to survey early childhood teachers from across the country through an online questionnaire platform. A total of 412 questionnaires were collected, with 26 invalid questionnaires eliminated due to overly short completion time (<3 minutes) and obvious pattern responses, ultimately yielding 386 valid questionnaires, representing an effective recovery rate of 93.7%. The basic information of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic information of subjects (N=386)

variable	category	Number of people	百分比(%)
Gender	Female	364	94.3
	Male	22	5.7
Age	25 years and below	112	29.0
	26-35 years	178	46.1
	36-45 years	76	19.7
	46 years and above	20	5.2
Education Level	Technical secondary school/high school	38	9.8
	College	124	32.1
	Undergraduate	208	53.9
	Master and above	16	4.2
Teaching experience	5 years and below	146	37.8
	6-10 years	132	34.2



variable	category	Number of people	百分比(%)
	11-15 years	64	16.6
	16 years and above	44	11.4
Nature of the garden	Public	172	44.6
	Private	214	55.4

2. Research Instruments

2.1 Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Identity Scale

Based on the research of Yi Lingyun et al. (2012), this study adopted the "Professional Identity Scale" specifically developed for early childhood teachers, which includes three dimensions: professional value identity, professional role identity, and professional development identity, with a total of 18 items. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.92, with internal consistency coefficients for each dimension ranging from 0.85 to 0.89, demonstrating good reliability and validity. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of this scale was 0.93.

2.2 Positive Leadership in Kindergartens Scale

Based on the research of Li Chaoping et al. (2012) and Zhao Shouying et al. (2018), this study adopted the "Positive Leadership Scale" suitable for the Chinese cultural context, with revisions for the kindergarten setting. The scale includes four dimensions: positive vision, positive emotion, positive relationships, and positive meaning, with a total of 20 items. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.94, with internal consistency coefficients for each dimension ranging from 0.87 to 0.91. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of this scale was 0.95.

2.3 Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Well-being Scale

Referencing the research of Renshaw et al. (2015) and Bian Qing & Jiang Qin (2014), this study adopted the "Professional Well-being Scale" developed for early childhood teachers. The scale includes four dimensions: job satisfaction, professional honor, interpersonal harmony, and professional growth, with a total of 24 items. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.93, with internal consistency coefficients for each dimension ranging from 0.86 to 0.90. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of this scale was 0.94.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted through the Wenjuanxing platform from March to April 2023. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 software, with the main statistical methods including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling. Following the recommendations of Hayes (2018), the Bootstrap method (5,000 resamples) was used to test the significance of the mediating effect. To control common method bias, both procedural and statistical control methods recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2012) were adopted.

Results

1. Common Method Bias Test

Since the data in this study were derived from self-reports of the same subjects, common method bias may exist. Harman's single-factor test was used for verification, conducting exploratory factor analysis on all measurement items. The results showed that there were 9 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1,





with the first factor explaining 28.64% of the variance, which is less than the critical standard of 40%, indicating that common method bias in this study is not severe.

2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results for each variable are shown in Table 2. The results indicate that there are significant positive correlations among early childhood teachers' professional identity, positive leadership in kindergartens, and professional well-being ($p < .01$). Specifically, professional identity is significantly positively correlated with professional well-being ($r = .58, p < .01$), positive leadership is significantly positively correlated with professional well-being ($r = .62, p < .01$), and professional identity is significantly positively correlated with positive leadership ($r = .46, p < .01$).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of each variable (N=386)

variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Professional identity	3.87	0.72	1		
2. Positive leadership	3.64	0.81	.46**	1	
3. Professional well-being	3.75	0.76	.58**	.62**	1

Note : ** $p < .01$

The results indicate: (1) early childhood teachers' professional identity has a significant positive impact on professional well-being ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1; (2) positive leadership in kindergartens has a significant positive impact on early childhood teachers' professional well-being ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2; (3) early childhood teachers' professional identity has a significant positive impact on positive leadership in kindergartens ($\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$).

4. Mediation Effect Test

The Bootstrap method (5,000 resamples) was used to test the mediating effect of positive leadership in kindergartens. The results showed that the indirect effect of early childhood teachers' professional identity on professional well-being through positive leadership was 0.21, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.15, 0.27], not containing 0, indicating that the mediating effect is significant. At the same time, the direct effect of professional identity on professional well-being ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$) was also significant, indicating that positive leadership in kindergartens plays a partial mediating role between professional identity and professional well-being. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

The results of the mediation effect analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Results of mediation effect analysis

Path	Effect size	Standard error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Total effect	0.62	0.05	0.53	0.71
Direct effect	0.41	0.05	0.31	0.51
Indirect effect	0.21	0.03	0.15	0.27



Discussion

1. The Relationship Between Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Identity and Professional Well-being

Results from research objective 1 found that early childhood teachers' professional identity is significantly positively correlated with professional well-being ($r = .58, p < .01$). This indicates that teachers with stronger professional identity experience higher levels of professional well-being. This finding aligns with our theoretical framework, suggesting that internal psychological resources play a vital role in determining occupational well-being outcomes.

This positive relationship may be because professional identity serves as a cognitive framework through which teachers interpret their professional experiences and derive meaning from their work. When early childhood teachers strongly identify with their professional role, they develop a deeper commitment to their educational values and practices, resulting in enhanced job satisfaction and psychological fulfillment. This interpretation corresponds with Day et al.'s (2006) conceptualization of teacher identity as comprising personal, professional, and situational dimensions that collectively influence teachers' sense of purpose and well-being. Similarly, Hong's (2010) research demonstrated that teachers with more robust professional identity demonstrated greater resilience when facing professional challenges.

Recent research further supports our findings. Buonomo et al. (2020) found that teachers' professional identity significantly predicted their psychological well-being ($\beta = .43, p < .001$) in a sample of 318 educators. Similarly, Perera et al. (2018) demonstrated that professional identity served as a protective factor against occupational stress and burnout symptoms among early childhood educators. These consistent findings across different cultural contexts underscore the universal importance of professional identity in fostering teacher well-being.

In the specific context of Chinese early childhood education, our findings gain additional significance given the unique challenges faced by teachers in this sector. As Zhang and Li (2020) documented, early childhood teachers in China often contend with high work intensity, limited career advancement opportunities, and inadequate social recognition. Under such circumstances, a strong professional identity appears to function as an internal resource that helps teachers maintain positive professional self-concepts despite external challenges.

2. The Relationship Between Positive Leadership in Kindergartens and Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Well-being

Results from research objective 2 found that positive leadership in kindergartens is significantly positively correlated with early childhood teachers' professional well-being ($r = .62, p < .01$). This finding suggests that leadership practices characterized by positive vision, emotional support, relationship building, and meaning creation significantly enhance teachers' professional well-being.

This relationship may be explained through the lens of the job demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014), wherein positive leadership functions as a critical organizational resource that buffers against job demands and facilitates engagement. When kindergarten directors practice positive leadership, they create supportive work environments that acknowledge teachers' contributions, provide necessary resources, and foster collaborative relationships—all of which contribute to teachers' sense of efficacy and belonging. This interpretation corresponds with Cameron's (2012) theoretical framework of positive leadership, which emphasizes creating positive organizational climates that promote individual and collective flourishing.

Current empirical research offers strong support for our findings. Kelloway et al. (2013) demonstrated that positive leadership behaviors significantly predicted employee well-being ($\beta = .47, p < .001$) across various occupational settings. More specific to educational contexts, Collie et al. (2020) found that school principals' positive leadership practices were associated with reduced teacher stress ($r = -.41, p < .01$) and increased job satisfaction ($r = .53, p < .01$). In a longitudinal study, Eldor and Shoshani (2021) observed that supportive leadership predicted increases in teacher well-being over one year, highlighting the causal nature of this relationship.



The connection between positive leadership and teacher well-being appears particularly relevant in early childhood education settings, where close collaboration among staff and emotional labor are defining characteristics of the work environment. As Hannah et al. (2009) noted, positive leadership nurtures organizational members' self-efficacy and identification with the organization's mission—factors that directly contribute to professional well-being. In the kindergarten context specifically, directors can enhance teachers' professional well-being by validating their work achievements, providing both emotional support and professional guidance, fostering harmonious interpersonal relations, and helping teachers discover deeper meaning in their educational practice.

3. The Mediating Role of Positive Leadership Between Professional Identity and Professional Well-being

Results from research objective 3 found that positive leadership plays a significant partial mediating role between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being (mediating effect 0.21, 95% CI[0.15, 0.27]). This finding reveals that while professional identity directly influences professional well-being, it also operates indirectly by affecting how teachers perceive and respond to leadership practices.

This mediating effect may be explained through social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which posits that individuals' cognitive evaluations influence their perception of and response to environmental factors. Teachers with stronger professional identity appear more attuned to positive leadership behaviors and more capable of leveraging these external resources to enhance their professional well-being. This interpretation aligns with Liu and Li's (2018) finding that teachers' professional identity influenced their receptivity to organizational support, which subsequently affected their occupational well-being outcomes.

Recent research supports the interactional dynamics we observed. Wang et al. (2019) documented that teachers' professional identity moderated the impact of leadership practices on various work outcomes, with high-identity teachers benefiting more from supportive leadership. Similarly, Gu et al. (2022) found that professional identity served as both an antecedent and moderator of teachers' responses to school climate factors, including leadership behaviors. These findings collectively suggest that professional identity and leadership practices function as complementary resources that interact to shape teachers' professional well-being.

The partial (rather than complete) mediation we observed indicates that professional identity maintains a direct influence on well-being independent of leadership effects. This result corresponds with the multi-dimensional model of teacher well-being proposed by Renshaw et al. (2015), which suggests that occupational well-being emerges from both internal psychological resources and external organizational conditions. The partial mediation also suggests that enhancing early childhood teachers' professional well-being requires attention to both personal development (strengthening professional identity) and organizational improvement (promoting positive leadership practices).

Our findings extend existing literature by illuminating the specific mechanisms through which professional identity and leadership practices jointly influence early childhood teachers' well-being in the Chinese educational context. The results suggest that professional development initiatives targeting teacher identity and leadership training programs focused on positive practices would have synergistic effects on teacher well-being outcomes. As Buonomo et al. (2020) argued, integrative approaches addressing both individual and organizational factors offer the most promising pathway to sustainable improvements in teacher well-being.

Conclusion

This study, based on social cognitive theory and the job demands-resources model as theoretical foundations, explored the relationship among early childhood teachers' professional identity, positive leadership in kindergartens, and professional well-being, with particular focus on testing the mediating role of positive leadership. Based on empirical research, this study reached the following conclusions:



First, there is a significant positive correlation between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being. Professional identity is an important internal psychological resource for predicting early childhood teachers' professional well-being. Early childhood teachers with higher levels of professional identity have greater recognition of their professional value, stronger acceptance of their professional role, and more positive attitudes toward professional development, thus experiencing a greater sense of achievement, satisfaction, and well-being from their work. This finding emphasizes the important influence of the formation and development of early childhood teachers' professional identity on their professional well-being, providing a new perspective for understanding the psychological health mechanisms of early childhood teachers.

Second, there is a significant positive correlation between positive leadership in kindergartens and early childhood teachers' professional well-being. Positive leadership is a key external environmental factor in enhancing early childhood teachers' professional well-being. The higher the level of positive leadership in kindergartens, the more positive vision, positive emotions, positive relationships, and positive meaning teachers perceive, and the stronger their professional well-being. This indicates that the leadership style and behavior of kindergarten directors have an important impact on the psychological state and work experience of early childhood teachers. In the special educational environment of kindergartens, positive leadership can create a supportive atmosphere, meet teachers' psychological needs, and promote the enhancement of teachers' professional well-being.

Third, positive leadership in kindergartens plays a partial mediating role between early childhood teachers' professional identity and professional well-being. This result reveals the mechanism among the three: on one hand, early childhood teachers' professional identity can directly predict their professional well-being; on the other hand, professional identity indirectly affects professional well-being by influencing teachers' perception and experience of positive leadership in kindergartens. Teachers with higher levels of professional identity are better able to positively perceive and accept the positive leadership behaviors of directors, thereby experiencing higher levels of professional well-being. This finding enriches the research on the formation mechanism of early childhood teachers' professional well-being, emphasizing the importance of the combined effect of individual internal factors and external environmental factors.

Fourth, the results of this study indicate that enhancing early childhood teachers' professional well-being cannot rely solely on increasing salaries or improving material conditions, but also requires attention to the construction of teachers' professional identity and the improvement of leadership methods in kindergartens. The partial mediating role of positive leadership in kindergartens further explains that even in cases of low levels of professional identity, positive leadership behaviors can, to some extent, enhance early childhood teachers' professional well-being, providing important implications for kindergarten management practices.

Recommendation

1. Suggestions for Applying Research Results

Based on our research findings, we propose the following recommendations for enhancing early childhood teachers' professional well-being. First, given that teachers' professional identity significantly correlates with their professional well-being ($r = .58$, $p < .01$), educational authorities and kindergarten administrators should prioritize strengthening early childhood teachers' professional identity. This can be achieved through implementing public awareness campaigns highlighting the expertise of early childhood educators, establishing fair compensation structures with clear career advancement pathways, and incorporating professional identity development into teacher education programs. Professional organizations should simultaneously create platforms for teachers to share successful experiences, reinforcing their sense of professional community.

Second, considering the significant positive correlation between positive leadership and professional well-being ($r = .62$, $p < .01$), educational authorities should develop specialized leadership training programs for kindergarten directors that emphasize positive leadership principles. These programs should





focus on creating inspiring visions, providing constructive feedback, fostering supportive environments, and helping teachers find meaning in their work. Regular evaluation processes should be implemented to assess leadership effectiveness in promoting teacher well-being, with mentor networks connecting new directors to experienced leaders demonstrating exemplary practices.

Third, our findings that positive leadership mediates the relationship between professional identity and well-being (mediating effect 0.21, 95% CI [0.15, 0.27]) suggest the need for coordinated multi-level support systems. At the individual level, psychological counseling services and stress management training should be provided; at the organizational level, workplace conditions should be improved with collaborative decision-making processes; and at the societal level, policies should be enacted to elevate the status of early childhood education with appropriate teacher-child ratios and increased investment. These interventions should address both personal development and organizational improvement simultaneously to maximize effectiveness.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

This research has established that professional identity and positive leadership significantly influence early childhood teachers' professional well-being, with leadership serving as a partial mediator in this relationship. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships and determine how these relationships evolve. Researchers should investigate how professional identity develops throughout different career stages, which specific leadership practices have the strongest impact in different contexts, and what additional variables might influence the relationship between identity, leadership, and well-being. Comparative studies examining these relationships across educational levels and cultural settings would further enrich our understanding of teacher well-being dynamics. RetryClaude can make mistakes. Please double-check responses.

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