Perceived Organizational Support, Emotional Labor, and Professional Identity in Preschool Teachers: Moderating Role of Psychological Capital

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Preschool educators in China face mounting emotional and professional strain due to policy reforms, low occupational status, and emotionally intensive teaching demands. While existing research highlights challenges in early childhood education, fewer studies explore how institutional and psychological resources jointly shape professional identity. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and emotional labor theory, this study examines how perceived organizational support (POS) affects professional identity (PI), with emotional labor (EL) as a mediator and psychological capital (PsyCap) as a moderator.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional survey of 928 preschool teachers from public and private kindergartens in Shandong Province, China, was conducted. Standardized scales measured POS, EL, PsyCap, and PI, with Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.88$ for all constructs. Structural equation modeling and PROCESS macro (Model 7) were used to test the moderated mediation model, with bootstrap methods applied to estimate indirect effects and interactions.

Results: POS significantly and positively predicted PI, and negatively predicted EL. EL partially mediated the POS–PI relationship. Furthermore, PsyCap moderated the indirect effect, such that the mediating role of EL was stronger among teachers with higher levels of PsyCap. These findings validate a resource-interaction model where both organizational and internal resources shape professional identity.

Conclusion: Organizational support enhances preschool teachers' professional identity both directly and by reducing emotional strain. Psychological capital amplifies this effect, enabling teachers to better internalize support. The findings underscore the need for early education policies to strengthen both institutional support and individual psychological capacities.

Keywords: Perceived Organizational Support; Emotional Labor; Psychological Capital; Professional Identity; Preschool Educators; Moderated Mediation Model

Introduction

In recent years, preschool educators in China have experienced increasing occupational strain due to mounting policy expectations, performance-based evaluations, emotional caregiving demands, and persistently low professional status. As the government continues to expand early childhood education (ECE) access and implement accountability frameworks, the psychological burden on frontline teachers has intensified. These pressures have raised widespread concerns about teacher retention, job satisfaction, and professional development within the early childhood sector. While many studies have explored external challenges, far fewer have examined the internal psychological mechanisms through which educators construct and sustain their professional identity under such evolving demands.

Professional identity—the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as competent, committed, and aligned with their occupational role—is widely recognized as a key psychological resource that influences teaching effectiveness, emotional resilience, and long-term career engagement. In the Chinese ECE context, where systemic undervaluation and emotionally intensive work are common, identity formation becomes especially critical. However, existing literature often treats identity as a fixed outcome rather than a dynamic construct shaped by both organizational and personal factors. What remains underexplored is how perceived organizational support and individual psychological resources jointly interact through emotional labor to influence the development of professional identity.

To address this theoretical gap, the present study draws on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and emotional labor theory (Hargreaves, 1998), which emphasize the role of resource investment and emotional regulation in occupational well-being. According to COR theory, individuals seek to acquire and preserve valuable resources to manage work-related stress. In teaching, perceived

organizational support (POS) serves as a vital external resource, while psychological capital (PsyCap)—including self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience—functions as an internal buffer (Avey et al., 2011). Meanwhile, emotional labor (EL), through which teachers regulate emotional expressions to meet institutional expectations, mediates the connection between support and identity. This study proposes and tests a moderated mediation model where POS influences professional identity through EL, moderated by PsyCap. The research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how organizational and psychological factors interact to shape teacher identity, offering theoretical contributions and practical guidance for supporting preschool educators.

Objectives

1. To investigate the direct effect of perceived organizational support on preschool teachers' professional identity.

2. To examine the mediating role of emotional labor in the relationship between perceived organizational support and professional identity.

3. To analyze the moderating role of psychological capital on the relationship between perceived organizational support and professional identity.

Literature review

1. Perceived Organizational Support and Professional Identity

Perceived organizational support (POS) refers to employees' belief that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Within early childhood education, POS has been widely recognized as a crucial organizational resource that enhances teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and psychological engagement. Empirical studies have demonstrated that when preschool teachers perceive high levels of organizational support, they are more likely to internalize institutional expectations, experience role affirmation, and construct a stable professional identity. Beijaard et al. (2004) emphasized that POS contributes to the development of professional self-concept by reinforcing individuals' sense of occupational legitimacy and worth. In the context of this study, POS functions as a foundational external resource that initiates the process of identity development by signaling recognition, stability, and institutional commitment.

2. Emotional Labor as a Mediator

Emotional labor (EL), defined as the regulation of emotional expressions to comply with organizational expectations, plays a central role in the professional lives of preschool teachers, who constantly engage in emotionally charged interactions (Day & Kington, 2008). Teachers often perform surface acting (modifying outward expressions) or deep acting (modifying internal emotional states) to maintain classroom harmony and fulfill nurturing responsibilities. While emotional labor has traditionally been associated with emotional exhaustion, Eisenberger et al. (1986) suggest that, under supportive conditions, EL can serve adaptive functions by aligning teachers' emotional expressions with professional norms. More recent perspectives (Fredrickson, 2001) position EL as a mediating process through which organizational conditions are internalized, influencing identity development. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes emotional labor as the psychological mechanism through which POS is translated into a sense of professional alignment and role coherence.

3. Psychological Capital as a Moderator

Psychological capital (PsyCap) is defined as a positive psychological state comprising four core elements: self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). In educational settings, PsyCap enables teachers to manage professional stress, maintain goal-directed behavior, and recover from setbacks, thus supporting sustained teaching commitment and role confidence (Grandey, 2000). While its direct effects on teacher outcomes have been documented, its moderating function remains underexplored. Within the proposed model, PsyCap is theorized to act as a buffering and amplifying resource that enhances the influence of POS on professional identity by increasing individuals' capacity to process and internalize

organizational support. Teachers with high PsyCap may be better positioned to transform external support into meaningful identity reinforcement, especially through the mediation of emotional labor.

4. Synthesis and Model Proposition

Although prior research has explored the separate effects of POS, EL, and PsyCap on teachers' occupational outcomes, integrated models that examine their interaction within a unified identity formation framework are scarce. Hargreaves (1998) and Hobfoll (1989) provide complementary theoretical foundations—emotional labor theory and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory—both of which underscore the importance of resource dynamics in shaping emotional and professional adaptation. However, few studies have applied this integrative approach within the context of Chinese preschool education, where teachers face high emotional demands, structural marginalization, and policy-driven accountability. To address this research gap, the present study proposes a moderated mediation model that incorporates organizational support, emotional regulation, and psychological capital to explain the formation of professional identity. By synthesizing insights from both COR theory and emotional labor theory, the model contributes to a more dynamic and contextually grounded understanding of how identity is constructed in emotionally intensive educational environments.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a moderated mediation model where perceived organizational support (POS) positively influences preschool teachers' professional identity (PI), with emotional labor (EL) acting as a mediator and psychological capital (PsyCap) moderating the indirect pathway. The model integrates organizational, emotional, and psychological factors to explain identity formation in early childhood educators (Figure 1).
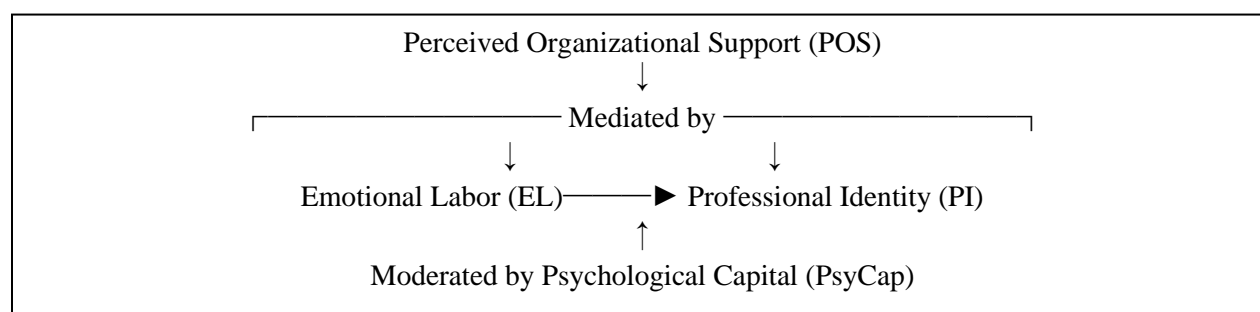
Figure 1 Research Framework
Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which is appropriate for testing the hypothesized moderated mediation model in a naturalistic setting. A cross-sectional approach enables the simultaneous examination of latent variable relationships and indirect effects, aligning with the study's goal of identifying structural pathways between organizational support, emotional labor, psychological capital, and professional identity.

1. Participants and Procedure

A total of 928 preschool teachers were recruited from public and private kindergartens across multiple cities in Shandong Province, China, using a stratified convenience sampling strategy to ensure both geographic and institutional diversity. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and the study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

2. Measures

All constructs were measured using validated multi-item scales, translated and adapted following a back-translation procedure to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence.

Additionally, a pilot study was conducted with 50 preschool teachers to assess the clarity, reliability, and cultural relevance of the Chinese versions of the scales. All items demonstrated strong internal consistency and contextual validity.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS): Measured with an 8-item scale adapted from Eisenberger et al. (1986); Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$.

Emotional Labor (EL): Assessed using a 14-item scale (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003), encompassing both surface and deep acting dimensions; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$.

Psychological Capital (PsyCap): Evaluated using the 24-item Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) by Luthans et al. (2007); Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$.

Professional Identity (PI): Measured with a 12-item scale adapted from Beijaard et al. (2004); Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$.

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The high internal consistency across all scales ($\alpha > 0.88$) confirms the reliability and construct validity of the measurement instruments.

3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were computed using SPSS 26.0. To test the hypothesized moderated mediation model, the study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 24.0, which enables the estimation of latent variable relationships and simultaneous assessment of mediation and moderation effects. In addition, the PROCESS macro (Model 7) developed by Hayes (2018) was used to validate the conditional indirect effects and generate bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 samples), ensuring the robustness of the moderated mediation findings.

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design with 928 valid responses from kindergarten teachers in Shandong Province. Validated scales were used to measure POS, EL, PsyCap, and professional identity. Analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability tests, SEM, and moderation–mediation modeling using SPSS in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary Table of Research Methodology.

Research Method Component	Description
Research Design	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey
Sample Size	928 valid kindergarten teacher responses
Sampling Method	Convenience sampling across Shandong Province
Key Instruments	POS (Ling et al.), EL (Grandey), PsyCap (PCQ-24), PI (Wei Shuhua, 2008)
Scale Reliability	All Cronbach's αs> 0.89, confirming high internal consistency
Data Collection	Online survey via institutional WeChat groups (April 2024)

Results

This section presents the empirical findings corresponding to the study's three primary research objectives, using a combination of descriptive statistics, hierarchical regression analysis, and moderated mediation modeling. These analyses aimed to systematically examine the direct, indirect, and conditional effects of perceived organizational support (POS) on kindergarten teachers' professional identity (PI), while considering the mediating role of emotional labor (EL) and the moderating role of psychological capital (PsyCap).

Shanock and Eisenberger's (2006) descriptive analyses confirmed that all core study variables—POS, EL, PsyCap, and PI—exhibited acceptable levels of distributional normality, and mean values indicated moderate to high perceptions of organizational support, emotional engagement, and internal psychological resources among participants. These results provided a sound empirical foundation for inferential analysis.

To address Objective 1, hierarchical regression was used to evaluate the direct effect of POS on PI, controlling for demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, and job title. The results demonstrated that POS was a significant and positive predictor of professional identity. This confirmed that teachers who perceived their institutions as supportive reported stronger alignment with their occupational role and identity.

For Objective 2, the mediating role of emotional labor in the POS–PI relationship was tested using an approach and bootstrapped indirect effect analysis. The findings revealed that POS was negatively associated with emotional labor, and that emotional labor was, in turn, negatively associated with professional identity. The indirect effect was statistically significant, indicating partial mediation. These

results suggest that POS enhances PI not only directly but also indirectly by alleviating emotional burden, thereby preserving teachers' psychological resources for professional engagement.

Addressing Objective 3, the study employed hierarchical regression and PROCESS macro (Model 7) to test whether psychological capital moderates the strength of the POS–PI link. The interaction between POS and PsyCap was statistically significant. Simple slope analysis revealed that the positive association between POS and PI was stronger among teachers with high levels of PsyCap, and weaker among those with low PsyCap. This interaction effect supports the notion that internal psychological resources enhance the identity-forming power of organizational support.

In combination, these results empirically validate a moderated mediation model in which perceived organizational support contributes to professional identity both directly and indirectly through emotional labor, and where this process is amplified by psychological capital. The model explains a substantial proportion of variance in professional identity, highlighting the critical interplay between institutional support mechanisms, emotion regulation processes, and internal psychological resilience in shaping early childhood educators' professional self-concept.

1. To explore the direct effect of sense of organisational support on kindergarten teachers' professional identity.

To explore the direct impact of perceived organizational support (POS) on the professional identity (PI) of kindergarten teachers, descriptive and inferential analyses were sequentially conducted. The sample consisted of 500 preschool educators drawn from multiple kindergartens in Eastern China, with a gender-balanced distribution (M = 0.49, SD = 0.50). The average age fell within a moderate range (M = 2.51), and most teachers held at least a bachelor's degree (M = 2.01), indicating a relatively well-educated teaching population. These demographic features reflect the shifting professionalization of early childhood education in China, where teacher qualifications are becoming a central policy concern.

Descriptive statistics for the primary study variables revealed that POS (M = 3.01, SD = 0.88), emotional labor (M = 3.07, SD = 1.28), and professional identity (M = 2.99, SD = 1.39) were all situated in the moderate-to-high range on a 5-point Likert scale. These results suggest that teachers in the sample generally perceived themselves as moderately supported, emotionally invested, and professionally aligned. Psychological capital (M = 3.95, SD = 1.53) emerged as the highest-scoring construct, indicating a relatively strong reservoir of internal psychological resources—such as hope, resilience, and self-efficacy—across the cohort. The skewness and kurtosis statistics fell within acceptable thresholds (Curran et al., 1996), supporting the use of parametric procedures.

To test the direct effect of POS on PI, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed, with professional identity as the dependent variable. Model 1, which included only demographic control variables (age, gender, education level, and job title), accounted for 30.7% of the variance in professional identity ($R^2 = 0.307$). In Model 2, the introduction of POS as a predictor significantly improved the model, increasing the explained variance to $R^2 = 0.325$, an incremental gain of 1.8%. This result indicates that perceived organizational support contributes unique explanatory power beyond background characteristics.

The standardized regression coefficient for POS was both positive and statistically significant (B = 0.327, p < .001), confirming that teachers who perceive higher levels of organizational support tend to report a stronger sense of professional identity. This finding underscores the conceptual assumption that professional identity is not merely shaped by personal experience or educational attainment, but is significantly influenced by the institutional environment. In supportive organizational contexts, teachers are more likely to feel valued, empowered, and aligned with their professional role, which in turn fosters stronger self-concept and occupational commitment.

Among the demographic covariates, job title was the only statistically significant predictor of professional identity (B = 0.843, p = .021), suggesting that individuals in higher organizational ranks (e.g., lead teachers, coordinators) exhibit stronger identity formation. This may reflect increased institutional recognition, greater decision-making autonomy, and a deeper sense of career progression. Interestingly, the predictive effect of teaching experience was rendered non-significant once POS was entered into the model. This result may imply that organizational support mediates the experience-identity relationship, whereby tenure alone does not guarantee professional affirmation unless it is reinforced through visible institutional support.

These findings highlight that perceived support from the institutional environment functions as a robust and proximal determinant of professional identity, operating independently of age, experience, or academic background. In early childhood education settings—where emotional labor is high and role

ambiguity persists—the presence of consistent organizational affirmation can serve as a stabilizing force in identity construction.

In summary, the results from Objective 1 provide compelling evidence for the direct effect of perceived organizational support on teachers' professional identity. This validates the theoretical proposition that POS acts as a key external resource, as posited in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), facilitating the internalization of professional values, self-worth, and occupational belonging. This foundational relationship sets the stage for further analysis of the mechanisms (emotional labor) and boundary conditions (psychological capital) that shape this link, as examined in the following objectives.

2. To examine the mediating role of emotional labor between sense of organisational support and professional identity.

To investigate whether emotional labor (EL) mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support (POS) and professional identity (PI), a series of regression analyses were conducted following the Baron and Kenny (1986) four-step method, and further validated using bootstrapped indirect effect estimation (5,000 samples) to ensure robustness of mediation inference.

In the first stage, POS was tested as a predictor of the mediator, emotional labor. The results indicated that POS significantly and negatively predicted emotional labor (Model 2: B = –0.319, p < .001), suggesting that teachers who perceived greater institutional support reported lower levels of emotional strain. This inverse relationship is theoretically grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which asserts that resource-rich environments mitigate the depletion of emotional energy by reducing the need for defensive strategies like surface acting or emotional suppression. In this context, supportive leadership, recognition, and clear communication channels may reduce the psychological pressure to mask emotions, thereby conserving teachers' emotional resources.

In the second stage, POS and emotional labor were entered simultaneously into a regression model predicting professional identity (Model 4). Emotional labor emerged as a strong and significant negative predictor of PI (B = –0.629, p < .001), indicating that higher emotional strain—manifested through sustained regulation of emotional expression—undermines a teacher's sense of professional alignment, efficacy, and role legitimacy. This result echoes earlier findings that emotional dissonance, when prolonged, can impair one's sense of authenticity and reduce occupational commitment, especially in care-intensive professions like early childhood education (Avey et al., 2011).

Interestingly, in this model, the direct effect of POS on PI was reduced to non-significance (B = 0.126, p = .085), whereas it had previously been significant in the absence of emotional labor. This reduction indicates that emotional labor partially mediates the POS–PI relationship. Bootstrapping results further confirmed the significance of the indirect effect (β = 0.200, 95% CI [0.148, 0.264]), supporting the robustness of the mediation pathway.

These findings support the proposition that emotional labor functions as a psychological conduit through which organizational support is translated into professional identity. Specifically, POS does not only acts as a direct affirmational force; it also attenuates the emotional cost of teaching, thereby allowing teachers to preserve and enhance their professional self-concept.

This dual-pathway effect of POS on PI is theoretically meaningful. On one hand, teachers who perceive their organization as supportive may internalize its positive regard, leading to stronger professional identification through value congruence and enhanced role significance. On the other hand, by reducing emotional strain, POS frees up cognitive and affective resources necessary for deeper identity formation—resources that would otherwise be exhausted through constant emotional masking or suppression. This aligns with recent perspectives that emphasize the emotional labor identity interface, where unmanaged emotional strain disrupts authentic role engagement and weakens the educator's sense of meaning and purpose in their work (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006).

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that efforts to build preschool teachers' professional identity should not be limited to symbolic recognition, institutional slogans, or top-down policy affirmations. Instead, they must also address the emotional ecology of the workplace—the underlying affective climate in which educators navigate daily interpersonal and instructional demands. While institutional support is necessary, it becomes truly effective when embedded in systems that acknowledge and actively manage the emotional labor teachers are expected to perform.

Specifically, schools and early childhood institutions should implement multi-level strategies such as ongoing emotional wellness programs, peer support networks, and training workshops in emotional

regulation techniques. These mechanisms not only mitigate the strain of surface acting or emotional dissonance but also cultivate a culture where teachers feel psychologically safe to express and process their emotions. By supporting educators in managing their emotional demands, institutions can disrupt the erosion of identity that often stems from long-term emotional suppression or role alienation. In this way, emotional labor is not eliminated but made more sustainable and meaningful, serving as a bridge rather than a barrier to identity formation.

In sum, the results from Objective 2 reinforce the critical function of emotional labor as a mediating psychological mechanism in the POS–PI relationship. They demonstrate that organizational support exerts influence both directly, by affirming professional values and belonging, and indirectly, by reducing the emotional costs that may otherwise impair teachers' self-perception. Emotional labor, often pathologized in workplace literature, is here redefined as a transformable process—one that, under the right support conditions, can channel organizational cues into identity coherence.

These insights set the stage for a deeper understanding of the moderating role of psychological capital, which may determine the extent to which teachers are able to mobilize both emotional and institutional resources in constructing a robust and enduring sense of professional identity.

3. To analyze the moderating role of psychological capital on the relationship between sense of organisational support and professional identity.

To examine whether psychological capital (PsyCap) moderates the relationship between perceived organizational support (POS) and professional identity (PI), a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. After controlling for demographic variables and entering the main effects of POS and PsyCap, the interaction term (POS $\times$ PsyCap) was introduced in Model 3. The addition of this interaction significantly improved the model, increasing the explained variance in PI to $R^2 = 0.452$, representing an incremental gain of $\Delta R^2 = 0.098$ over the previous model.

The interaction term was statistically significant and positive (B = 0.370, $p < .001$), confirming that psychological capital moderates the effect of organizational support on professional identity. This suggests that the relationship between POS and PI is conditional upon teachers' levels of internal psychological resources, such that the positive influence of perceived support is stronger among those with higher PsyCap.

To further interpret this interaction, a simple slope analysis was conducted. The results showed that for teachers with high levels of PsyCap, the slope of POS predicting PI was steeper and highly significant, indicating that these individuals are more likely to convert organizational support into a strong sense of professional identity. In contrast, among teachers with low PsyCap, the effect of POS on PI was considerably weaker, though still positive, suggesting that internal psychological depletion limits the extent to which external support is internalized and translated into a coherent professional self-concept.

This interaction pattern underscores what COR theory terms the resource gain spiral, whereby individuals with robust internal resources (hope, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience) are not only more capable of leveraging external support but also more likely to experience positive identity reinforcement from that support (Hobfoll, 1989). Conversely, teachers with diminished psychological reserves may lack the cognitive or emotional bandwidth to fully perceive or utilize institutional support, weakening its identity-enhancing effect.

Theoretically, this finding contributes to a more contextualized and interactional understanding of identity formation in early childhood education. It challenges models that treat external support as uniformly beneficial, instead revealing that support must be matched by internal readiness to yield optimal outcomes. In line with COR theory, psychological capital acts as an amplifying resource that shapes how external support is received, interpreted, and emotionally internalized.

In practical terms, this suggests that organizational interventions aimed at improving professional identity should not focus solely on enhancing structural or managerial support, but also invest in building teachers' psychological resources. Capacity-building initiatives—such as resilience training, mindfulness programs, self-efficacy workshops, or mentoring systems—can equip teachers with the internal tools necessary to maximize the benefits of organizational support.

Moreover, the findings imply that POS-based policies may yield uneven outcomes if individual PsyCap levels are not taken into account. Two teachers in the same school may receive the same institutional resources but derive very different psychological and professional outcomes, depending on their internal coping capacities. Therefore, supportive environments must be coupled with internal development strategies to ensure that institutional resources are not only delivered but also meaningfully utilized.

In sum, the results from Objective 3 confirm that psychological capital (PsyCap) significantly moderates the relationship between perceived organizational support (POS) and professional identity (PI) among preschool teachers. Specifically, when teachers possess high levels of internal psychological resources—such as resilience, hope, optimism, and self-efficacy—the identity-strengthening effects of organizational support are amplified. Conversely, when psychological capital is low, the same level of institutional support exerts a weaker influence on identity development, suggesting that internal capacities serve as catalysts through which external resources become internalized.

This interaction effect offers empirical validation of the resource matching principle embedded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that individuals are more capable of utilizing contextual supports when they possess internal assets to absorb, transform, and apply those supports. In this context, PsyCap functions not merely as a moderating variable but as a capacity amplifier, enhancing teachers' ability to convert external recognition, care, and structural assistance into meaningful identity construction processes.

The finding also contributes conceptually to teacher identity theory, which has increasingly emphasized identity as a dynamic, relational, and multilayered construct. Rather than being formed solely through external validation (e.g., policy incentives, leadership feedback), professional identity emerges through the co-construction of environmental signals and personal interpretive frameworks. Teachers with strong PsyCap are more likely to perceive support as empowering rather than prescriptive, enabling them to integrate institutional cues into a coherent professional self-concept grounded in personal values and long-term commitment.

Importantly, this interaction completes the empirical testing of the study's moderated mediation model, showing that the POS $\rightarrow$ PI pathway is both indirectly influenced by emotional labor and conditionally intensified by psychological capital. This integrative finding reinforces the view that teacher identity development cannot be fully explained by either structural or personal factors alone—it is the intersection of support systems and internal dispositions that drives sustained professional engagement and retention, particularly in emotionally demanding contexts like early childhood education.

Thus, psychological capital serves as a resilience filter, determining whether organizational support is absorbed, amplified, or deflected. The presence of high PsyCap transforms support into identity; its absence renders support less impactful, or even inert.

This insight has important implications. Theoretically, it affirms the multi-systemic nature of teacher development, in which individual psychological resources and organizational climates interact to shape identity trajectories. Practically, it suggests that policies aimed at improving teacher retention and satisfaction must not only strengthen external support structures but also invest in building internal psychological capacities through training, reflective practice, and socioemotional development programs.

In conclusion, this moderation effect establishes the final empirical pillar of the proposed framework and sets the stage for a broader discussion of how identity, support, and emotional labor interact in shaping sustainable early childhood teaching careers. The following sections explore these implications in depth, focusing on theoretical advancement and scalable interventions in teacher development systems.

Discussion

This study is among the first to construct and validate a moderated mediation model of preschool teacher professional identity that simultaneously incorporates organizational support, emotional labor, and psychological capital. It addresses a significant gap in early childhood education research by moving beyond fragmented predictors to offer a systematic, resource-based explanation of identity formation.

The findings reconceptualize perceived organizational support (POS) as both a direct driver of professional identity and an indirect influence operating through emotional labor. Emotional labor, often viewed as a stressor, is here shown to function as a psychological mechanism that channels support into professional meaning.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that psychological capital amplifies the identity-building effects of organizational support, offering novel evidence for resource interaction effects within the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. This confirms that identity is co-shaped by external support and internal capacity.

By integrating COR theory with emotional labor theory, this research advances a dynamic, multi-level model of professional identity construction. Table 2 summarizes these contributions, showing how each component modifies or extends existing theoretical frameworks.

Table 2 New Knowledge Summary Table.

New Knowledge Contribution	Explanation
Integrated moderated mediation model.	Combines POS, EL, and PsyCap into one explanatory framework
Application of COR theory in early education	Links external support and internal psychological resources
Emotional labor as a partial mediator	Explains how support indirectly shapes identity through emotional regulation
Psychological capital as a moderator	Shows individual strengths amplify organizational influences

Conclusion

This study addressed the theoretical gap in understanding how organizational, emotional, and psychological resources jointly shape preschool teachers' professional identity. The findings confirmed that perceived organizational support directly predicts identity, emotional labor partially mediates this relationship, and psychological capital moderates the strength of support's influence.

Theoretically, the study refines the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by demonstrating how external and internal resources interact to influence identity formation in emotionally intensive educational contexts. Practically, it identifies actionable strategies for teacher development, showing that organizational support is most effective when paired with psychological capacity-building interventions. At the policy level, the results advocate for embedding psychological resource development—such as resilience and self-efficacy training—into early childhood education reform agendas.

Future research should explore the longitudinal dynamics of psychological capital and how it evolves alongside institutional support to sustain identity and professional growth in early educators.

Recommendation

1. General Recommendations

To effectively support the professional identity development of preschool teachers, educational institutions should adopt a dual-level strategy:

1.1 At the Organizational Level:

Create supportive working environments through inclusive leadership, transparent communication, and timely recognition of teacher contributions.

Institutionalize emotional support systems, including peer counseling, structured wellness programs, and professional learning communities, to alleviate the burden of emotional labor.

Enhance the visibility and professional status of preschool teachers by incorporating their voices into policy development and public education campaigns, reinforcing their occupational legitimacy.

1.2 At the Individual Level:

Provide targeted psychological capacity-building programs, such as resilience workshops, optimism training, and self-efficacy coaching, to cultivate internal resources.

Encourage reflective practices, such as journaling or guided mentoring, that help teachers process emotional experiences and reinforce professional alignment.

Foster access to socio-emotional learning resources, including mindfulness and emotion regulation training, to reduce burnout and promote identity stability.

2. Recommendations for Further Research

Future studies should consider adopting longitudinal or mixed-method designs to capture the evolving nature of professional identity over time and under shifting institutional conditions. In particular, qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or narrative inquiry could offer richer insights into how teachers internalize organizational support and negotiate emotional labor in daily practice—nuances that standardized surveys may overlook.

Additionally, research could:

Compare regional and cultural variations in the moderated mediation model to test its generalizability across diverse educational settings.

Explore the role of additional contextual moderators, such as leadership style, organizational climate, or peer relationships, in shaping the POS–PI pathway.

Investigate intervention-based models that experimentally test the effects of psychological capital training on identity development and job retention in early childhood education.

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