

The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Learning Engagement Among Preschool Education Undergraduates at Jilin Province in China

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Abstract

This research investigates the correlation between professional identity and learning engagement among undergraduate students in preschool education in Jilin Province, China. A quantitative research design was employed, encompassing 125 students from four universities. The survey comprised 30 items categorised into three constructs: impact of professional identity (IPI), components of professional identity (CPI), and variation in learning engagement (VLE). Each construct was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale. The universities were chosen to yield a varied sample throughout the province, guaranteeing the findings are widely applicable. Random sampling was utilised, and classes were stratified by academic year to guarantee representation across all levels of study. The data collection was performed ethically, with informed consent acquired from all participants. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0, encompassing descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to examine the relationships among the constructs. The findings indicated substantial correlations between professional identity and learning engagement, underscoring the impact of professional identity on students' educational experiences and levels of engagement. The findings indicate that cultivating a robust professional identity among preschool education undergraduates may be a crucial strategy for improving learning engagement. This study elucidates the influence of professional identity on learning engagement, providing critical insights for educators and policymakers in the formulation of effective teacher education programs that enhance student participation and achievement in preschool education.

Keywords: Professional Identity; Learning Engagement; Preschool Education and Undergraduate Students

1. Introduction

Professional identity in education is a complex notion that includes the self-perception, values, and beliefs that educators develop during their training and while engaging in teaching roles. For undergraduates majoring in preschool education, cultivating a strong professional identity is crucial, as it influences their future teaching methodologies and involvement in the learning process (Beijaard et al., 2004). This identity encompasses self-assurance in one's abilities, congruence with professional values, and a dedication to ethical practices, all of which are vital for effective teaching. Recent research highlights the significance of early professional socialisation in the development of professional identity, indicating that interactions and experiences during teacher training play a crucial role in this formation (Smith & Avery, 2019). Learning engagement denotes the extent of attention, interest, and enthusiasm demonstrated by students in their educational pursuits (Fredricks et al., 2004). In higher education, especially in teacher training programs, engagement is essential for developing effective teaching strategies and ensuring the success of future educators. Engaged students are more inclined to participate actively in class, pursue supplementary learning opportunities, and implement their knowledge in practical contexts. These behaviours are essential for their professional role preparation (Kahu, 2013).

Furthermore, research shows that faculty members' support and feedback, in addition to the curriculum, influence learning engagement. Despite the recognised significance of professional identity and learning engagement in teacher education, there exists a discernible gap in research investigating the correlation between these constructs among undergraduate students in preschool education (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Recent studies underscore the imperative for educators to cultivate a robust professional identity to improve engagement and teaching effectiveness (Pillen et al., 2018). Moreover, swift technological advancements and continuous educational policy reforms have complicated identity formation and student engagement processes (Smith & Avraamidou, 2020). Comprehending the influence of professional identity on learning engagement can provide significant insights into how educational institutions can enhance support for students in developing their professional identities and fostering engagement in learning (Sutherland et al., 2010). Evidence indicates that misalignment between students' personal values and professional identity may result in dissonance, diminishing engagement and heightening the risk of burnout (Lin & Wang, 2021).

This is especially pertinent in preschool education, where a robust professional identity can profoundly impact teaching efficacy and, consequently, student outcomes in early childhood environments (Sims & Walsh, 2009). Moreover, cultivating a supportive educational atmosphere that promotes professional identity formation has been associated with heightened job satisfaction and reduced attrition rates among educators. Current literature suggests that insufficient engagement in teacher education programs may result in reduced self-efficacy and professional burnout, highlighting the necessity of identifying factors that promote student engagement and identity development (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Studies indicate that mentoring and peer collaboration significantly enhance engagement and professional identity among teacher trainees.

This study is important for multiple reasons. First, it contributes to the scant body of research regarding the correlation between professional identity and learning engagement in preschool education. The study focusses on undergraduate students in Jilin Province, providing insights that are contextually relevant and potentially applicable to other regions and educational environments. Prior research has revealed regional disparities in the formation of professional identity, indicating the necessity for localised investigation. The results possess significant implications for teacher education programs. Understanding the impact of professional identity on learning engagement can facilitate the creation of curricula and support systems that enhance both elements' development. If particular elements of professional identity are recognised as closely linked to increased learning engagement, teacher education programs can integrate activities and experiences that foster these elements. Such activities may encompass reflective practices, opportunities for aligning personal values with professional standards, and experiences that enhance confidence in their capabilities as future educators (Trede, 2012). Research has demonstrated that integrating experiential learning and community engagement enhances professional identity and involvement in teacher education.

Thirdly, the study emphasises preschool education, highlighting the pivotal role of early childhood educators in children's development. Teachers who are committed and have a robust professional identity are more inclined to foster positive learning environments, employ effective teaching strategies, and facilitate the social and emotional development of their students (O'Connor, 2008). This corresponds with research highlighting the influence of teacher engagement on the quality of early childhood education. This research aims to enhance our comprehension of fostering professional identity and learning engagement among preschool education undergraduates, potentially leading to improved educational outcomes for young children. This study utilises a quantitative research design, yielding objective and statistically robust results that can guide both policy and practice. The research employs a correlational design and validated survey instruments to guarantee result reliability, providing a basis for future studies in this domain (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Utilising SPSS for data analysis, encompassing descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, enables an in-depth examination of the connections between professional identity and learning engagement. Recent advancements in statistical analysis techniques facilitate a more nuanced comprehension of these relationships by accounting for mediating and moderating variables.

This study addresses a notable gap in the literature regarding the relationship between professional identity and learning engagement among undergraduates in preschool education. The findings may improve teacher education programs and aid in the development of more effective strategies for cultivating professional identity and engagement among future educators. This study aims to deepen our comprehension of these dynamics, ultimately aiding in the development of preschool educators who are actively involved in their learning and possess a robust professional identity, thus enhancing the overall quality of early childhood education. Moreover, it underscores the necessity for ongoing professional development and support for early childhood educators to maintain their engagement and identity over the long term.

2. Literature Review

Recent research has explored the connection between professional identity and learning engagement among preschool education students, uncovering new insights. Embacher and Smidt (2023) examine how preschool teachers' professional competencies affect the quality of interactions and relationships between teachers and children. Research indicates that educators' beliefs and levels of engagement substantially influence task orientation and the quality of interactions, implying that a robust professional identity correlates with favourable teacher-child relationships (Embacher & Smidt, 2023). The influence of professional satisfaction on learning engagement in preschool education undergraduates, revealing that professional commitment serves as a mediator in this relationship. This study emphasises that elevated professional satisfaction correlates with enhanced learning engagement, underscoring the necessity of cultivating professional identity to promote commitment and satisfaction among students.

Colmer (2017) underscores the significance of collaborative professional learning in advancing leadership, professional identity, and professionalism. Research indicates that collaborative dialogue and the implementation of leadership in professional development activities can reinforce educators' professional identities, subsequently improving their learning engagement and effectiveness (Colmer, 2017).

Jurčević-Lozančić (2015) analyses preschool educators' perspectives on professional development, highlighting the necessity for lifelong learning and ongoing professional advancement. The research indicates that professional identity is significantly linked to educators' readiness to participate in continuous professional development, which subsequently affects their learning engagement and instructional methods (Jurčević-Lozančić, 2015). Robinson Seisdedos et al. (2021) examine the challenges preschool educators encounter in their early career stages, emphasising the significance of support and substantive learning experiences in the development of professional identity. The research highlights that initial work experiences profoundly influence teachers' professional identity and their later involvement in learning and teaching methodologies (Robinson Seisdedos et al., 2021).

Kilinc et al. (2016) examine the impact of professional development programs, particularly drama-based initiatives, on preschool teachers' perceptions of children's identities and capabilities. These programs promote a

redefinition of learning identities, thereby strengthening professional identity and increasing engagement in teaching (Kilinc et al., 2016). Muñez et al. (2017) investigate the correlation between professional development activities and preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Engagement in informal professional development significantly predicts teachers' self-efficacy, thereby strengthening the connection among professional identity, self-efficacy, and learning engagement (Muñez et al., 2017). Carlsson and Linnér (2010) examine the significance of identity development and equitable opportunities in early childhood education. The authors emphasise the necessity of establishing a nurturing environment for both boys and girls to promote identity development, learning engagement, and equitable opportunities in preschool contexts (Carlsson & Linnér, 2010). Tatalović Vorkapić et al. (2014) examine preschool teacher identity from multiple perspectives, encompassing personality characteristics and professional responsibilities.

The research contends that both professional and personal aspects of identity substantially affect the quality of preschool education and learning outcomes, highlighting the influence of a robust professional identity on learning engagement (Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2014). These supplementary studies underscore that professional identity in preschool education is a pivotal element affecting learning engagement, motivation, and overall teaching quality. Educators can strengthen their professional identity by promoting professional development, cultivating self-efficacy, and encouraging reflective practices, resulting in increased engagement and effectiveness in their teaching roles.

Graph 1. Conceptual Framework:



A strong professional identity embodies educators' self-perception, convictions, and attitudes regarding their roles, including professional competence, satisfaction, self-efficacy, and reflective practices (Embacher & Smidt, 2023; Muñez et al., 2017; Vorkapić et al., 2014). Professional development, encompassing collaborative learning, lifelong learning, and supportive early career experiences, is pivotal in shaping identity and augmenting teaching engagement (Colmer, 2017; Jurčević-Lozančić, 2015; Robinson Seisdodos et al., 2021). Learning engagement is affected by task orientation, motivation, and self-efficacy, all of which are enhanced by a robust professional identity (Embacher & Smidt, 2023; Muñez et al., 2017). A robust professional identity enhances teaching quality, engagement, and child-teacher relationships (Embacher & Smidt, 2023).

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a quantitative design to examine the correlation between professional identity and learning engagement among preschool education undergraduates in Jilin Province, China. Quantitative research is essential for examining educational phenomena as it facilitates objective measurements and statistical data analysis, yielding reliable and generalisable results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study utilises a correlational research design to investigate the relationship between variables, specifically how elements of professional identity influence learning engagement (Seeram, 2019). The study encompassed 125 undergraduate students from four universities in Jilin Province: Changchun Guanghua University, Yanbian University, Jilin Normal University, and Northeast Normal University. The selected institutions represent various geographic locations within the province,

ensuring a diverse sample that reflects the wider student population (Bryman, 2016). Random sampling was utilised to guarantee a representative participant sample, thereby augmenting the study's validity and reliability (Singh et al., 1996).

The student population at each university was categorised by academic year (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior), and a class was randomly chosen from each level for survey participation. The survey instrument consisted of 30 items categorised into three constructs: the impact of professional identity (IPI), components of professional identity (CPI), and variation in learning engagement (VLE). Each construct comprised 10 items evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," a prevalent approach for measuring attitudes and perceptions in educational research (Likert, 1932). The IPI items concentrated on students' identification with the role of a preschool educator and its impact on their engagement in learning activities. The CPI items evaluated students' self-perception as prospective educators and their alignment with preschool education values, whereas the VLE items assessed students' class participation, attentiveness during lectures, diligence in assignment completion, and proactive involvement in learning activities.

The data collection was executed via a survey distributed to the chosen classes. Prior to data collection, consent was secured from the universities in accordance with ethical research standards (Flick, 2018). Participants were apprised of the study's objective and guaranteed voluntary and anonymous involvement, with the option to withdraw at any moment, which is essential for upholding ethical standards in educational research (BERA, 2018). Informed consent was secured from each student to guarantee compliance with ethical standards. The gathered data were analysed utilising SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics were employed to encapsulate demographic characteristics and primary variables. Correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships among the constructs, exploring the influence of intermediary variables on both independent and dependent variables.

This study seeks to identify variations among various demographic factors and ascertain the significance of the primary variables associated with professional identity and learning engagement. Through an analysis of these relationships, this research aims to elucidate how professional identity impacts students' engagement in their education. Comprehending these dynamics is crucial for formulating strategies to improve learning engagement, especially in preschool education, where professional identity can profoundly influence teaching efficacy and student results (Day et al., 2006).

4. Results

This section delineates the principal findings of the study, which sought to investigate the correlation between professional identity and learning engagement among preschool education undergraduates in Jilin Province, China. The findings are categorised into descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. These analyses elucidate the degree to which students' professional identity, encompassing its influence and fundamental elements, forecasts their participation in academic and extracurricular endeavours. The results provide significant insights into the influence of professional identity on enhancing learning engagement within teacher education programs.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.946	30

Descriptive Statistics

This study involved 125 undergraduate preschool education students from four universities in Jilin Province, China. The participants, uniformly distributed across academic years, represented various geographical regions within the province. The constructs that were assessed were Impact of Professional Identity (IPI), Components of Professional Identity (CPI), and Variation in Learning Engagement (VLE).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Professional Identity and Learning Engagement

Construct	Mean	SD
Impact of Professional Identity (IPI)	4.32	0.53
Components of Professional Identity (CPI)	4.28	0.59
Variation in Learning Engagement (VLE)	4.20	0.55

The average scores for IPI and CPI exceeded 4.0, signifying that the participants possessed a robust professional identity. Likewise, the VLE construct exhibited a high mean score, indicating substantial engagement in learning activities.

Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis indicated substantial positive correlations among the constructs, especially between IPI and VLE, as well as CPI and VLE.

Table 2. Correlation Between Professional Identity and Learning Engagement

Construct Pair	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p)
IPI and VLE	0.65	< 0.01
CPI and VLE	0.58	< 0.01

The data indicates a robust positive correlation between the IPI and VLE ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) as well as between the CPI and VLE ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that a more robust professional identity correlates with increased participation in learning activities.

Figure 1: Correlation Between Professional Identity and Learning Engagement

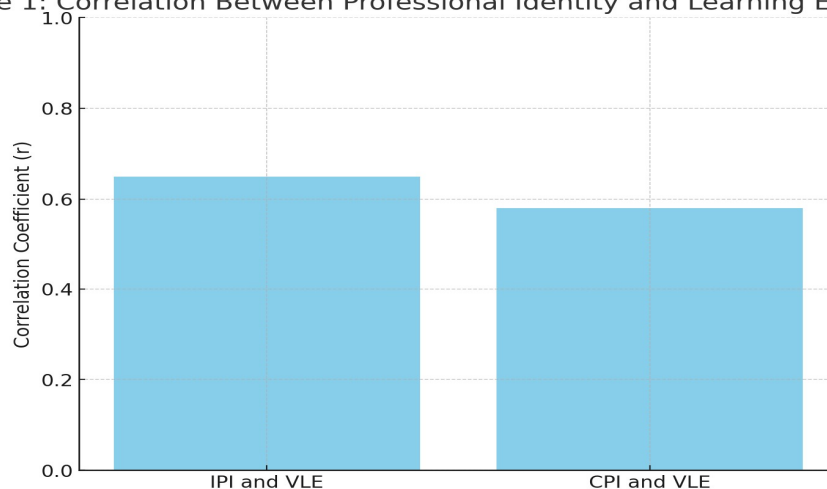


Figure 1: Correlation Between Professional Identity and Learning Engagement

This figure demonstrates the significant positive correlations between the Impact of Professional Identity (IPI) and Learning Engagement (VLE) ($r = 0.65$), as well as between the Components of Professional Identity (CPI) and Learning Engagement (VLE) ($r = 0.58$).

Figure 2: Predictive Value of Professional Identity on Learning Engagement

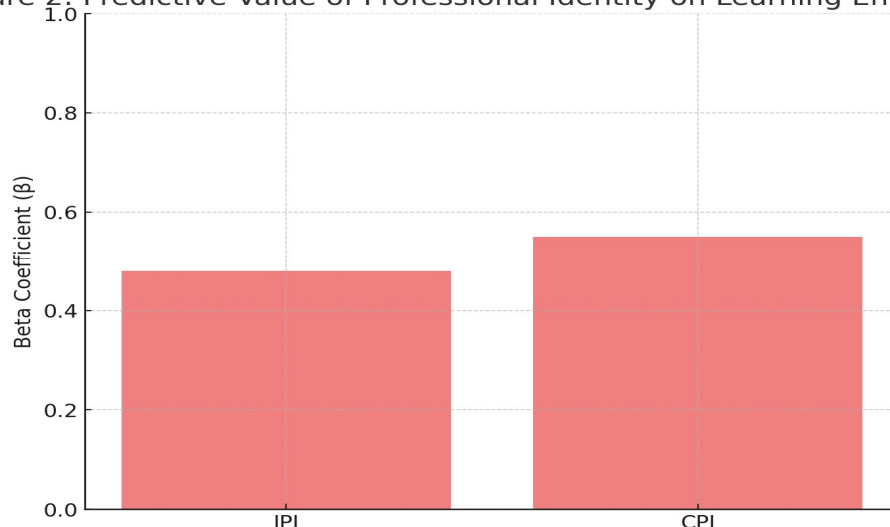


Figure 2: Predictive Value of Professional Identity on Learning Engagement

The figure illustrates the regression analysis results, indicating that both IPI ($\beta = 0.48$) and CPI ($\beta = 0.55$) are significant predictors of learning engagement.

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive significance of professional identity (IPI and CPI) on learning engagement (VLE). The model accounted for 45% of the variance in learning engagement.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Predicting Learning Engagement

Predictor	Beta Coefficient (β)	t-value	Significance (p)
Impact of Professional Identity (IPI)	0.48	4.62	< 0.001
Components of Professional Identity (CPI)	0.55	5.23	< 0.001

The findings indicate that both IPI ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) and CPI ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$) are significant predictors of learning engagement. The CPI exhibited a marginally superior predictive value, indicating that students' confidence in their capabilities as prospective educators significantly influences their learning engagement.

Breakdown by Constructs

Additional analysis was performed to delineate the influence of IPI and CPI on particular facets of learning engagement. The Impact of Professional Identity (IPI): Students exhibiting elevated IPI scores indicated enhanced motivation to engage in classroom activities, solicit feedback, and immerse themselves in coursework. Components of Professional Identity (CPI): Elevated CPI scores correlated with enhanced collaboration in group projects and proactive engagement in pursuing supplementary learning resources. The findings suggest that educational initiatives aimed at enhancing professional identity should enhance students' learning engagement. Enhancing professional identity in teacher training programs via practical teaching experiences and professional development opportunities may result in more motivated and engaged future educators.

5. Findings and Discussion

This study sought to investigate the correlation between professional identity and learning engagement among undergraduate students in preschool education in Jilin Province, China. The results indicated robust correlations and regression analyses that underscore the importance of professional identity in improving student engagement. One hundred twenty-five students took part, and the descriptive statistics showed high mean scores for impact of professional identity (IPI = 4.32), components of professional identity (CPI = 4.28), and variation in learning engagement (VLE = 4.20).

This suggests that these students had a strong professional identity and were very interested in their studies. A Pearson correlation analysis showed that there were strong positive correlations between IPI and VLE ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) and between CPI and VLE ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), showing that students who strongly identified with their future roles as teachers were more interested in learning activities. These findings correspond with previous research that underscores the significance of professional identity in influencing student behaviour (Kelchtermans, 2009; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Regression analysis indicated that professional identity significantly predicted learning engagement, explaining 45% of the variance in VLE. The CPI ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$) was identified as the most significant predictor, followed by the IPI ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the critical role of self-efficacy in influencing engagement. This discovery aligns with Bandura's (1997) theory, which asserts that individuals who possess self-efficacy are more inclined to confront challenges and participate actively. Students exhibiting elevated IPI demonstrated greater motivation to engage in classroom activities, solicit feedback, and immerse themselves in their studies, whereas those with increased CPI displayed enhanced collaboration in group projects and a proactive approach to acquiring supplementary resources.

These findings indicate that professional identity affects both individual learning behaviours and collaborative endeavours. The study's practical implications underscore the necessity for teacher education programs to incorporate professional identity development into their curricula, emphasising self-efficacy and collaborative learning environments to improve engagement. Furthermore, early immersion in preschool environments and access to professional development opportunities are advised to assist students in fortifying their professional identity. Policy modifications can enhance educators' engagement with their roles, resulting in improved academic outcomes and increased motivation (Bandura, 1997; Kelchtermans, 2009; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

6. Conclusion

This research examined the correlation between professional identity and learning engagement among undergraduate students in preschool education in Jilin Province, China. The results indicated a substantial positive correlation between the constructs of professional identity—specifically the impact of professional identity (IPI) and the components of professional identity (CPI)—and learning engagement (VLE). Regression analysis indicated that professional identity is a significant predictor of engagement, accounting for a considerable portion of the variance in student participation and motivation. Confidence in one's abilities as a future educator (CPI) emerged as the most significant predictor, highlighting the importance of self-efficacy in promoting active learning. The ramifications for teacher education programs are evident: cultivating a robust professional identity among students is essential for enhancing learning engagement. Programs that incorporate professional identity development, foster collaborative learning environments, and prioritise practical teaching experiences are likely to enhance student outcomes. Early exposure to preschool teaching environments and ongoing professional development opportunities may significantly strengthen students' associations with their future roles as educators. These findings indicate that professional identity is not merely an internal process but a vital element in student engagement and success. Enhancing this identity through systematic educational strategies can significantly contribute to the cultivation of highly motivated and proficient future educators.

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Appendix – A

Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. I strongly identify with the role of a preschool educator.					
2. I feel confident in my abilities as a future preschool educator.					
3. My professional identity motivates me to participate in class activities.					
4. I apply what I learn in class to real-world preschool scenarios.					
5. Having a strong professional identity increases my commitment to my coursework.					
6. My professional identity encourages me to engage in additional learning opportunities.					
7. I am more engaged in group projects because of my professional identity.					
8. I seek help or feedback to improve my learning due to my professional identity.					
9. I stay informed about preschool education trends because of my professional identity.					
10. My professional identity increases my enthusiasm for learning about preschool education.					
11. I see myself as a future preschool educator.					
12. I feel part of the preschool education community.					
13. My values match those of preschool education.					
14. I am committed to ethical teaching practices.					
15. I am motivated to improve my teaching skills.					
16. I take pride in becoming a preschool educator.					
17. I can apply teaching theories effectively.					
18. I feel responsible for improving preschool education.					
19. I am eager to join professional education networks.					
20. My educator identity influences my learning approach.					
21. I actively participate in class discussions.					
22. I stay focused during lectures and					

activities.					
23. I complete assignments with a high level of effort.					
24. I seek additional resources to enhance my learning.					
25. I collaborate effectively with peers on group projects.					
26. I regularly reflect on my learning progress.					
27. I set personal learning goals for my coursework.					
28. I am proactive in seeking feedback from instructors.					
29. I feel motivated to improve my teaching practices.					
30. I engage in extracurricular activities related to preschool education.					