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Educational Practicum Environment and Professional Identity among Preschool Education Student Teachers: A Multiple Mediation Analysis

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Abstract:
Educational practicum environment is a key context in which preschool education student teachers experience professional roles and develop professional identity. This study surveyed 282 preschool education interns from a teacher education university in Hunan Province to examine how the educational practicum Environment influences professional identity. The results showed that students who voluntarily chose preschool education reported stronger professional identity and more positive perceptions of the educational practicum environment than those transferred into the major, although both groups showed relatively low professional will. Six-year program students scored lower than four-year program students in professional value, kindergarten organizational support, mentor teacher support, and overall practicum environment. All dimensions of the practicum environment were positively associated with professional identity. Practicum participation and relational climate, together with kindergarten organizational support, significantly predicted professional identity. Multiple mediation analysis further indicated that mentor teachers professional support did not directly predict professional identity; instead, it exerted its influence indirectly through practicum participation and relational climate and kindergarten organizational support. These findings suggest that professional identity in preschool education is shaped by authentic participation, positive relationships, and sustained organizational support. Universities and practicum kindergartens should strengthen collaborative mentoring, expand interns meaningful participation, and provide targeted support for six-year program students and students transferred into the major.

Keywords:
educational practicum environment; professional identity; preschool education student teachers; practicum participation; organizational support; multiple mediation

1.Introduction

Professional identity refers to an individual's subjective emotional experience and internal cognition regarding occupational identity, value, and characteristics. It includes both internal identification with work content and work patterns, as well as value judgments about external conditions such as remuneration and social sta-

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tus (王 , 曾 & 张 ,2010; 张 & 赵 ,2018). For students majoring in preschool education, kindergarten teaching is characterized by high emotional investment, intensive workload, and strong responsibility. Professional identity is therefore a key factor influencing their career choice and occupational retention (HONG J Y,2010).

Educational practicum is the process through which student teachers, for the first time, enter real educational settings as “prospective teachers” to transform knowledge, experience professional roles, and undergo emotional development(高 ,2019). However, educational practicum does not necessarily lead to a linear improvement in normal student professional identity. Existing studies have revealed the complexity of its influence. On the one hand, successful practicum experiences can enhance normal student perceived professional benefits, improve self-efficacy, and thereby strengthen professional identity (任 , 任 , 李 & 王 2023; 张 & 赵 ,2018). On the other hand, reality shock, role pressure, the disconnection between theory and practice, and ethical dilemmas encountered during practicum may weaken normal student enthusiasm for teaching and even lead to career avoidance (李 , 赵 & 刘 2022; 张 , 陈 & 江 2022; 李 , 李 & 闫 , 2021).

Most existing studies, however, tend to treat “educational practicum” as a homogeneous whole, focusing mainly on whether practicum is available or on the overall effect of practicum satisfaction. Less attention has been paid to the specific mechanisms through which different dimensions of the practicum environment operate. The educational practicum environment is a multidimensional field, in which organizational support from practicum kindergartens, professional support from mentor teachers, and the relational climate and participation perceived by interns may exert differentiated influences on professional identity. This issue is particularly important in preschool education, where many students in China enter the major through adjustment or transfer rather than voluntary choice. Yet there remains insufficient empirical evidence on how key demographic variables, such as college entrance examination preference and program type, affect students' perceptions of the practicum environment and the construction of professional identity.

Based on this, the present study developed a questionnaire on the educational practicum environment and professional identity of preschool education student teachers. It surveyed preschool education student teachers who had completed their practicum and introduced a multiple mediation model to examine the influence pathways of the practicum environment on professional identity. Specifically, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: The dimensions of the educational practicum environment, including kindergarten organizational support, mentor teachers’ professional support, and practicum participation and relational climate, are significantly and positively correlated with pre-service teachers' professional identity.

This hypothesis is grounded in social support theory and field theory. According to social cognitive theory, a supportive environment can effectively enhance individuals' professional efficacy and positive emotions (Bandura A; 1986). Zhang Xiaohui et al. found that mentor teacher support during practicum was significantly and positively related to normal student professional efficacy, professional identity, and career commitment. Field theory emphasizes that practicum is a transitional process in which student teachers move from the academic field of the university to the practical field of the kindergarten. The rules, resources, and relational networks provided by the new field jointly shape the quality of identity construction (Bourdieu P,1993; 李 , 赵 & 刘 2022). Therefore, this study expected that a supportive and participatory practicum environment

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would positively predict pre-service teachers' professional identity.

H2: Practicum participation and relational climate, together with kindergarten organizational support, mediate the relationship between mentor teachers' professional support and professional identity.

Mentor teachers are the key “significant others” in the practicum field. High-quality professional support can function as a catalyst that encourages interns to become more actively involved (陈 & 曲, 2021). Meanwhile, interns develop perceptions of the overall organizational support of the practicum kindergarten by observing the interaction between mentor teachers and the management team, as well as the extent to which they themselves are accepted by the kindergarten (马 & 王, 2024). When interpersonal support from mentor teachers is transformed into institutional support from the kindergarten, interns' sense of being professionals is strengthened and further internalized into a high level of professional identity (江 & 陈, 2017). Therefore, mentor teachers' support does not operate in isolation, but indirectly shapes professional identity by activating interns' deep participation and positive perceptions of organizational support.

H3: Significant differences exist in professional identity and perceptions of the practicum environment across demographic variables such as college entrance examination preference and program type.

Li Qiong et al. found that publicly funded preschool education normal student show three types of professional identity orientations, namely “career-oriented,” “academic-oriented,” and “profession-oriented,” and that their teaching motivation directly influences their evaluation of the external value of the profession. In addition, differences in program type may lead to variations in curriculum design, practicum duration, professional knowledge preparation, reflective capacity, and sensitivity to the practicum environment. It is therefore necessary to examine the differentiating effects of these demographic variables on the core research variables.

2.Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were preschool education student teachers who had completed their practicum at a teacher education university in Hunan Province. A total of 334 questionnaires were distributed from December 2025 to January 2026, and 301 valid questionnaires were returned. After excluding 19 questionnaires with identical response patterns, 282 cases were retained for analysis. Among them, 86 students were enrolled in the six-year program beginning after junior high school, 113 in the five-year program, and 83 in the four-year program. In terms of major-choice status, 182 students had voluntarily chosen preschool education, while 100 had been transferred into the major. All participants provided informed consent, and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Changsha Normal University.

2.2. Measures

The Educational Practicum Environment Questionnaire was developed on the basis of previous literature (王, 曾 & 张,2010). It contained 23 items scored on a five-point Likert scale. Exploratory factor analysis supported a three-factor structure: practicum participation and relational climate, mentor teachers' professional support, and kindergarten organizational support. The KMO value was 0.960, Bartlett's test was significant,

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and the cumulative explained variance was 78.07%. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three factors were 0.92, 0.89, and 0.91, respectively.

Professional identity was measured using the Professional Identity Scale for Student Teachers developed by Wang Xinqiang and colleagues. The scale includes four dimensions: professional willingness and expectations, professional will, professional value, and professional efficacy, with 12 items in total. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the total scale was 0.91, and the coefficients of the subscales ranged from 0.82 to 0.88.

2.3. Data Analysis

SPSS 26.0 was used for descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Spearman correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. Because some variables did not meet the normality assumption, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were used. Mediation effects were tested with Hayes' PROCESS macro, Model 4, using 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals. A p-value below 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

3.Results

3.1. Differences by Major-choice Status and Program Type

Students who voluntarily chose preschool education scored significantly higher than students transferred into the major in professional willingness and expectations, professional value, professional efficacy, and total professional identity. They also reported higher levels of kindergarten organizational support, mentor teachers' professional support, practicum participation and relational climate, and overall practicum environment. No significant difference was found in professional will, and both groups showed relatively low mean scores on this dimension.

3.1 Differences in Demographic Variables

3.1.1 Influence of College Entrance Examination Preference

The independent-samples t-test showed that students who had voluntarily chosen preschool education scored significantly higher than those who had been transferred into the major in professional willingness and expectations, professional value, professional efficacy, and total professional identity. However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in professional will, and the mean scores of both groups were relatively low. In addition, the voluntary-choice group scored significantly higher in kindergarten organizational support, mentor teachers' professional support, practicum participation and relational climate, and overall educational practicum environment ($p < 0.05$).

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Table 1. Differences in Professional Identity and Practicum Environment by College Entrance Examination Preference (M ± SD)

Variable	Voluntary-choice group (n=182)	Transfer group (n=100)	t	p
Professional willingness and expectations	4.12 ± 0.80	3.87 ± 0.86	2.53	0.012
Professional will	2.80 ± 0.69	2.64 ± 0.71	1.76	0.079
Professional value	3.14 ± 0.96	2.88 ± 0.92	2.17	0.031
Professional efficacy	3.82 ± 0.87	3.50 ± 0.76	3.17	0.002
Total professional identity	3.47 ± 0.62	3.22 ± 0.60	3.25	0.001
Kindergarten organizational support	3.54 ± 0.93	3.26 ± 1.01	2.39	0.018
Mentor teachers' professional support	3.70 ± 0.86	3.40 ± 0.84	2.75	0.006
Practicum participation and relational climate	3.88 ± 0.76	3.65 ± 0.78	2.36	0.019
Total educational practicum environment	3.71 ± 0.78	3.44 ± 0.76	2.80	0.005

3.1.2 Influence of Program Type

One-way ANOVA showed that significant differences existed among different program types in professional value, kindergarten organizational support, mentor teachers' professional support, and the overall educational practicum environment. LSD post hoc comparisons indicated that four-year program students scored significantly higher than six-year program students in professional value, organizational support, mentor teachers' professional support, and the overall educational practicum environment ($p < 0.05$). Five-year program students fell between the two groups, but no significant differences were found between them and either four-year or six-year program students. No significant differences were found among program types in professional willingness, professional will, professional efficacy, or total professional identity.

Table 2. Mean Comparisons of Key Variables among Interns in Different Program Types

Variable	Six-year program (n=86)	Five-year program (n=113)	Four-year program (n=83)	F	p	LSD
Professional value	2.81 ± 0.91	3.11 ± 0.95	3.20 ± 0.97	4.12	0.017	Four-year > Six-year
Kindergarten organizational support	3.22 ± 0.90	3.43 ± 1.04	3.70 ± 0.89	5.38	0.005	Four-year > Six-year
Mentor teachers' professional support	3.42 ± 0.79	3.60 ± 0.88	3.78 ± 0.87	3.61	0.028	Four-year > Six-year
Total educational practicum environment	3.45 ± 0.69	3.61 ± 0.81	3.78 ± 0.79	3.96	0.020	Four-year > Six-year

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Since the data did not meet the assumption of normal distribution, as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test, $p < 0.05$, Spearman's rank correlation analysis was used. The results showed that all dimensions of the edu-

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cational practicum environment were significantly and positively correlated with total professional identity, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.591 to 0.666, $p < 0.01$. Among them, practicum participation and relational climate had the strongest correlation with professional willingness and expectations, $\rho = 0.710$. Professional will showed weaker correlations with other variables, ranging from $\rho = 0.086$ to 0.649, and was not significantly correlated with professional willingness and expectations, $\rho = 0.086$, $p = 0.149$.

Table 3. Spearman Correlation Matrix of Core Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Kindergarten organizational support	1						
2. Mentor teachers' professional support	0.642**	1					
3. Practicum participation and relational climate	0.692**	0.781**	1				
4. Professional willingness and expectations	0.524**	0.568**	0.710**	1			
5. Professional will	0.312**	0.230**	0.157**	0.086	1		
6. Professional value	0.477**	0.390**	0.372**	0.257**	0.649**	1	
7. Professional efficacy	0.504**	0.564**	0.642**	0.701**	0.219**	0.459**	1
8. Total professional identity	0.609**	0.591**	0.629**	0.677**	0.616**	0.788**	0.803**

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

3.3 Regression Analysis: Prediction of Professional Identity by the Practicum Environment

Taking total professional identity as the dependent variable and kindergarten organizational support, mentor teachers' professional support, and practicum participation and relational climate as independent variables, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The results showed that the overall model was significant, $F(3, 278) = 92.05$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 49.8% of the total variance, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.493. Practicum participation and relational climate, $\beta = 0.394$, $p < 0.001$, and kindergarten organizational support, $\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$, significantly and positively predicted professional identity. However, the predictive effect of mentor teachers' professional support did not reach statistical significance, $\beta = 0.094$, $p = 0.166$. Multicollinearity diagnostics showed that VIF values ranged from 2.05 to 2.77, indicating no serious multicollinearity.

Table 4. Multiple Regression of Educational Practicum Environment on Professional Identity

Independent Variable	B (SE)	β	t	p	VIF
Constant	1.295 (0.133)		9.72	< 0.001	
Kindergarten organizational support	0.187 (0.039)	0.291	4.78	< 0.001	2.05
Mentor teachers' professional support	0.068 (0.049)	0.094	1.39	0.166	2.54
Practicum participation and relational climate	0.315 (0.056)	0.394	5.58	< 0.001	2.77

$R^2 = 0.498$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.493$, $F = 92.05$***.

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3.4 Multiple Mediation Effect Analysis

The preceding regression analysis showed that the direct predictive effect of mentor teachers' professional support on professional identity was not significant. It was therefore inferred that mediating pathways may exist between the two variables. Taking practicum participation and relational climate, M1, and kindergarten organizational support, M2, as parallel mediating variables, a multiple mediation model was constructed to systematically examine the mechanism through which mentor teachers' professional support, X, affects professional identity, Y.

The path analysis results showed that mentor teachers' professional support significantly and positively predicted both practicum participation and relational climate and kindergarten organizational support. Practicum participation and relational climate, as well as kindergarten organizational support, both significantly and positively predicted professional identity. The direct effect of mentor teachers' professional support on professional identity was not significant. The total indirect effect was 0.355, including an indirect effect of 0.217 through practicum participation and relational climate and an indirect effect of 0.138 through kindergarten organizational support. The confidence intervals of both mediation paths did not include zero. The total effect was 0.423, and the indirect effect accounted for 83.9% of the total effect. These findings confirm that practicum participation and relational climate and kindergarten organizational support exert a complete multiple mediation effect between mentor teachers' professional support and professional identity.

Table 5. Results of Multiple Mediation Effect Test

Effect Path	Effect Size	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Direct effect, X → Y	0.068	0.049	-0.029	0.165
Indirect effect 1, X → Climate → Y	0.217	0.042	0.129	0.292
Indirect effect 2, X → Organization → Y	0.138	0.028	0.081	0.191
Total indirect effect	0.355	0.049	0.248	0.439
Total effect	0.423	—	—	—

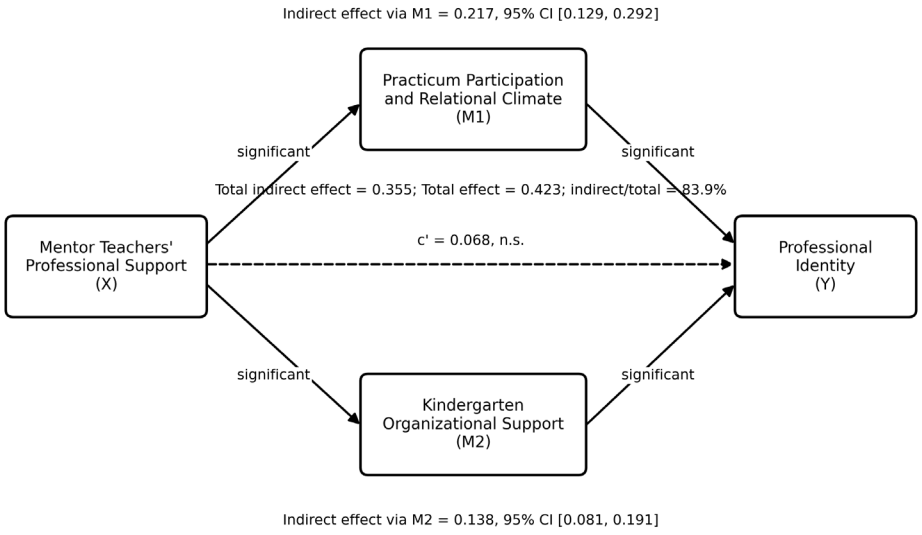


Figure 1. Path Diagram of the Multiple Mediation Model

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4.Conclusions

4.1 Educational Interpretation of Group Differences

The results indicate that voluntary major choice is associated with stronger professional identity and more positive practicum perceptions. Students who actively choose preschool education tend to have clearer career expectations and stronger intrinsic motivation, making them more likely to seek support, participate in practice, and interpret practicum experiences positively. By contrast, students transferred into the major may have weaker emotional commitment and may be more sensitive to pressure and reality shock during practicum.

The low level of professional will in both groups deserves attention. Initial interest in the major does not necessarily develop into long-term willingness to teach. Through practicum, students directly encounter the emotional labor, work intensity, remuneration conditions, and social support realities of kindergarten teaching. Therefore, teacher education programs should not only cultivate interest in the major, but also strengthen professional value education, career resilience, and long-term teaching commitment.

The lower scores of six-year program students suggest that students entering teacher education from junior high school may face greater challenges in professional cognition, self-choice awareness, and practicum adaptation. Shorter practicum duration and weaker support conditions may further limit their opportunities to build stable relationships and participate deeply in educational practice. Their practicum arrangement should therefore be improved through longer practice periods, stronger mentoring, emotional support, and better resource provision.

4.2 Practicum Environment and Professional Identity

The significant positive correlations between the practicum environment and professional identity show that professional identity is closely related to the quality of real educational experience. Among the environmental dimensions, practicum participation and relational climate were especially important. This suggests that students' willingness to become teachers is strengthened when they are genuinely included in kindergarten life and receive positive interpersonal feedback.

Preschool education is highly practical and relational. Professional identity cannot be formed only through theoretical learning; it is constructed through role experience in authentic settings. When interns participate in class management, teaching activities, child observation, childcare, and reflection, and when they receive recognition from mentor teachers, children, and peers, their professional efficacy, belonging, and value identity are enhanced. Conversely, if interns remain peripheral observers or are assigned only routine tasks, it is difficult for them to develop a stable teacher role identity.

The non-significant relationship between professional will and professional willingness indicates that short-term willingness and long-term persistence are different processes. Professional willingness is more closely linked to positive practicum experiences, whereas professional will is constrained by broader occupational realities such as income, pressure, career prospects, and social support. Professional identity education should therefore integrate positive experience with realistic career preparation.

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4.3 Mechanism of Mentor Teachers' Professional Support

The mediation results show that mentor teachers' professional support does not directly generate professional identity. Rather, it becomes effective when it creates opportunities for participation and strengthens perceived organizational support. Mentor teachers' demonstration, feedback, encouragement, and task empowerment can improve interns' sense of safety and competence, enabling them to move from observers to prospective teachers.

Mentor teachers also serve as a bridge between interns and the kindergarten organization. Their willingness to introduce institutional rules, invite interns into teaching teams, and involve them in teaching research activities shapes interns' judgments of whether the kindergarten accepts and supports them. In this sense, mentor teacher support has both interpersonal and organizational meanings.

The absence of a significant direct effect reflects the complexity of professional identity formation in preschool education. Individual mentor support alone may not offset students' concerns about workload, emotional labor, social status, and career prospects. Only when such support is translated into deep participation, positive relationships, and organizational acceptance can it promote the internalization of professional identity.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study shows that the educational practicum environment is closely related to professional identity among preschool education student teachers. Students who voluntarily chose preschool education reported higher professional identity and more positive practicum perceptions, but long-term teaching will remained weak across groups. Six-year program students showed lower levels of professional value and practicum support than four-year program students, indicating a need for targeted assistance.

Practicum participation and relational climate and kindergarten organizational support were significant predictors of professional identity. Mentor teachers' professional support influenced professional identity mainly through these two mediating pathways. Thus, professional identity is not simply the result of being guided by a mentor teacher; it is formed when guidance is transformed into meaningful participation, positive relationships, and perceived organizational acceptance.

5.2 Recommendations

First, universities should strengthen professional identity education throughout preschool teacher preparation, especially for students transferred into the major. Career planning, professional value education, role models, and guidance on the realities of preschool teaching can help students develop informed and stable teaching intentions.

Second, practicum arrangements should ensure meaningful participation. Kindergartens should avoid marginalizing interns or assigning only routine tasks. Instead, interns should be involved in class management,

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teaching design, child observation, childcare, home-kindergarten communication, teaching research, and reflective practice.

Third, kindergarten organizational support should be improved. Clear intern identity, basic working and learning conditions, open communication channels, access to teaching research activities, and a respectful climate can enhance interns' sense of belonging and professional value.

Fourth, mentor teacher support should be embedded in a collaborative teacher education system. Universities and kindergartens should clarify mentoring responsibilities, strengthen mentor selection and training, and combine individual guidance with institutional support.

Fifth, special attention should be given to six-year program students. Their practicum support can be strengthened through transitional field experiences, longer practicum duration, dedicated mentors, psychological support, and career counseling, so as to improve adaptation and promote professional identity development.

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Author Contributions

Xia Yang: study design, data collection, statistical analysis, manuscript writing; Lu Xing: data analysis guidance, manuscript revision.

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