

The Relationship Between Mentor Teacher Support and Emotional Labor of Pre-service Preschool Education Teachers: The Mediating Role of Professional Identity

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Abstract

To explore the mediating role of professional identity between the mentor teacher support perceived by pre-service preschool education teachers and their emotional labor, this study took 452 pre-service preschool education teachers who had completed their internships as research subjects. Analysis of variance, regression analysis and mediating effect analysis were adopted to examine the relationships among the variables. The results showed that: mentor teacher support significantly predicted emotional labor ($\beta=0.181$, $p<0.001$) and professional identity ($\beta=0.578$, $p<0.001$); professional identity played a partial mediating role in the relationship between mentor teacher support and emotional labor (the mediating effect value was 0.083, accounting for 45.86% of the total effect).

Keywords

Emotional Labor; Teacher Support; Professional Identity; Pre-Service Teachers; Preschool Education.

1. Introduction

Pre-service teachers are a special group different from ordinary college students, as they have a clear professional orientation and will engage in basic education teaching after graduation [1]. Educational internship is an indispensable and important stage in the learning process of all pre-service preschool education teachers. However, in the field of teacher education research, the emotional experiences of student teachers have not attracted sufficient attention [2]. Like in-service teachers, student teachers are engaged in work that requires physical strength, mental effort and high emotional involvement, thus belonging to the group with high emotional labor intensity [3]. Emotional labor refers to the process in which individuals regulate their emotional feelings and expressions to meet organizational requirements [4]. Teachers are constantly involved in the process of emotional labor, managing their emotions to fulfill organizational goals and expectations [5]. Based on emotional regulation strategies, emotional labor can be divided into three types: surface acting, deep acting and natural expression. Surface acting refers to the process of pretending to experience emotions expected by the organization or suppressing those not expected by it; deep acting refers to the efforts or process of changing internal feelings to achieve the emotional expressions expected by the organization; natural expression means that individuals spontaneously exhibit emotional expressions consistent with organizational requirements [6]. Deep acting involves individuals adjusting their internal emotional feelings to align internal and external emotional experiences, which is a positive form of emotional adaptation. In contrast, surface acting is a negative form of emotional adaptation where individuals feign emotions to meet organizational demands [7]. The adoption of emotional labor strategies reflects teachers' physical and mental health status in responding to educational and teaching work, and is also an integral part of the professionalism of preschool education [8]. Evidence has confirmed

that emotional labor is a key competency demonstrated by high-quality teachers (Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011) [9], and teachers face tremendous pressure to suppress or express certain emotions [10]. Research on the emotional labor of pre-service preschool education teachers is quite limited, with most studies focusing on in-service teachers. Therefore, this study aims to explore the level of emotional labor and the adoption of relevant strategies among pre-service preschool education teachers.

Teacher support is one of the important sources of social support for students in the learning process, referring to teachers' caring, listening, understanding, solicitude and encouraging behaviors towards students in the educational process [11]. Among the external factors influencing preschool teachers' emotional labor, social relationships are the key to understanding emotional labor [12]. The mentor teacher at the internship kindergarten is the most crucial figure promoting the growth of student teachers during the internship [13]. When student teachers receive positive feedback from mentor teachers during teaching practice, they experience more positive emotions and fewer negative ones [14]. Studies have found that social support is significantly positively correlated with deep acting and natural expression, and significantly negatively correlated with surface acting [15][16]. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that mentor teacher support can significantly predict the emotional labor of pre-service teachers.

Professional identity refers to an individual's positive attitude and strong sense of engagement in a certain profession, reflected in the individual's desire to maintain the profession and the degree of affection for it [17]. Studies have found that the overall level of professional identity of pre-service preschool education teachers towards the teaching profession is relatively high, with the highest level of recognition of the intrinsic value of the teaching profession and the lowest level of commitment to teaching [18]. Other studies have shown that pre-service preschool education teachers have insufficient willingness to engage in teaching, and the employment matching rate for kindergarten teaching positions is not high, while the attitude of professional identity has the greatest impact on the willingness to teach [19]. Professional identity is influenced by educational internship [20]. During educational internships, pre-service teachers witness the harsh realities of preschool teachers' work, such as heavy workload and low salary and benefits, which to a certain extent weakens their professional identity [21]. In contrast, social relationships and various forms of support during the internship, especially the support from mentor teachers, have a significant impact on student teachers' professional identity. Unprofessional mentor teachers and unclear internship goals will have a negative impact on the professional identity of student teachers [22]. Pre-service teachers who receive social support from important others such as mentor teachers will have an enhanced sense of identity with the teaching profession [1], and mentor teacher support has a significant positive predictive effect on professional identity [23][24]. In addition, a strong professional identity can help individuals select positive and effective emotional regulation strategies and avoid negative ones [25]. Further studies have pointed out that preschool teachers' professional identity is significantly correlated with emotional labor, and preschool teachers with high professional identity are more likely to adopt natural expression and deep acting [26]. In view of this, this study hypothesizes that the professional identity of pre-service teachers plays a mediating role between teacher support and emotional labor.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Subjects

Based on the principles of purposive sampling and convenience sampling, this study selected several undergraduate universities in Suzhou, Taizhou, Yangzhou, Suqian and Xuzhou in

Jiangsu Province for the survey. The research subjects were pre-service preschool education teachers in the third or fourth year who had completed a centralized internship of no less than 3 weeks. From June 2024 to June 2025, questionnaires were distributed to pre-service teachers who had finished their internships via an online questionnaire platform. A total of 460 questionnaires were collected, 8 invalid ones were excluded, and 452 valid questionnaires were retained. Among the subjects, 34 were male and 418 were female; 425 were third-year students and 27 were fourth-year students; 49 had a cumulative centralized internship duration of 3-4 weeks, 181 had 5-8 weeks, 61 had 9-12 weeks, 107 had 13-16 weeks, and 54 had more than 16 weeks.

2.2. Research Instruments

2.2.1. Mentor Teacher Support Scale

The Mentor Support Scale compiled by Annemie Schepens (2009) [27] was adopted, which includes 8 items without sub-dimensions. Two preschool education experts were invited to test the content validity of the scale, one of whom was a PhD in preschool education from the United States and translated the questionnaire. The term "school" in the original questionnaire was adjusted to "kindergarten", and "school teaching process" was revised to "daily activity process in kindergarten". The scale used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", with higher scores indicating a stronger perception of teacher support by interns. The reliability test showed that the overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.954, indicating high reliability. The fitting indices of confirmatory factor analysis were as follows: $\chi^2/df=9.881$, RMSEA=0.140, GFI=0.888, CFI=0.948, NFI=0.948.

2.2.2. Emotional Labor Scale

The three-dimensional Emotional Labor Strategy (ELS) Scale compiled by Diefendorff (2005) [28] was used, which consists of 14 items including surface acting (3 items), deep acting (4 items) and natural expression (7 items). This measurement tool has been widely used by domestic scholars. The scale adopted a 5-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", with higher scores indicating a higher tendency to adopt the corresponding emotional labor strategy. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the entire scale was 0.882, and the internal consistency coefficients of the subscales for surface acting, deep acting and natural expression were 0.906, 0.958 and 0.881, respectively. The fitting indices of confirmatory factor analysis were as follows: $\chi^2/df=3.523$, RMSEA=0.075, GFI=0.953, CFI=0.978, NFI=0.969.

2.2.3. Professional Identity Scale

The Professional Identity Scale for Pre-service Teachers compiled by Zhang Xiaohui (2016) [29] was employed, which contains 10 items divided into two dimensions: intrinsic identity (7 items), referring to the value judgment on the inherent professional attributes of the teaching profession such as work content and mode; and extrinsic identity (3 items), referring to the value judgment on the social attributes of the teaching profession such as working environment, salary and benefits, and social status. The scale used a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", with higher scores indicating a stronger professional identity. The Cronbach's α coefficients of the total scale, intrinsic identity subscale and extrinsic identity subscale were 0.973, 0.914 and 0.877, respectively, indicating high reliability of the scale.

2.3. Data Processing

SPSS 22.0 software was used for descriptive statistical analysis, difference test and correlation analysis, and the PROCESS macro program of SPSS was applied to test the mediating model.

3. Research Results

3.1. Common Method Bias Test

Since all scales in this study were completed by the same subjects, common method bias may exist in the measurement due to factors such as social desirability and item expression. Therefore, to exclude this possibility, Harman's single-factor test was used to conduct factor analysis on all items. The test results showed that there were 4 common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the variance explanation rate of the largest factor was 36.17%, which met the critical criterion of less than 40% [30]. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no serious common method bias in this study.

3.2. Basic Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

3.2.1. Difference Analysis of Mentor Teacher Support, Emotional Labor and Professional Identity

Independent-samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine the differences in mentor teacher support, emotional labor and professional identity of pre-service preschool education teachers in terms of gender, grade and internship duration. The results showed that: there were significant differences in mentor teacher support perceived by pre-service preschool education teachers with different internship durations; LSD post-hoc test indicated that the mentor teacher support for interns with 3-4 weeks of internship was significantly lower than that for those with 5-8 weeks and more than 16 weeks of internship; there were significant differences in emotional labor in terms of gender, grade and internship duration, among which male pre-service teachers had a significantly higher overall level of emotional labor than female ones, third-year interns had a significantly lower level of emotional labor than fourth-year interns; LSD post-hoc test showed that the emotional labor level of interns with 3-4 weeks of internship was lower than that of those with 9-12 weeks, that of interns with 5-8 weeks was lower than that of those with 9-12 weeks and 13-16 weeks, and that of interns with 9-12 weeks was lower than that of those with more than 16 weeks; there were no significant differences in professional identity in terms of gender, grade and internship duration. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1. Difference Test of Teacher Support, Emotional Labor and Prof. Identity

	Category	Teacher Support	Emotional Labor	Prof. Identity
Gender	Male (n=34)	4.34±0.81	3.71±0.88	4.92±1.15
	Female (n=418)	4.20±0.80	3.51±0.71	4.66±1.06
	t	0.93	1.23*	1.37
Grade	Junior (n=425)	4.22±0.81	3.51±0.71	4.67±1.08
	Senior (n=27)	4.16±0.68	3.83±0.82	4.78±0.86
	t	0.38	-2.26*	-0.51
Internship Duration	3-4 weeks (n=49)	3.97±0.83	3.50±0.60	4.55±0.98
	5-8 weeks (n=181)	4.33±0.69	3.40±0.72	4.68±1.01
	9-12 weeks (n=61)	4.13±0.90	3.80±0.76	4.89±1.01
	13-16 weeks (n=107)	4.14±0.88	3.63±0.69	4.60±1.19
	More than 16 weeks (n=54)	4.31±0.83	3.47±0.78	4.74±1.14
	F	2.69*	4.12**	0.97
	LSD	1<2,1<5	1<3,2<3,2<4,3<5	

Note: *P<0.05, **P<0.01, ***P<0.001. The same below.

3.2.2. Correlation Analysis of Mentor Teacher Support, Emotional Labor and Professional Identity

Correlation test was conducted on all variables in this study before the mediating effect analysis. Pearson correlation analysis (see Table 2) showed that: mentor teacher support was significantly positively correlated with emotional labor ($r=0.20$, $p<0.001$), especially with deep acting and natural expression; teacher support was significantly positively correlated with professional identity ($r=0.44$, $p<0.001$), as well as with its intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions; the professional identity of pre-service preschool education teachers was significantly positively correlated with emotional labor ($r=0.27$, $p<0.001$) and its extrinsic dimension. Among the dimensions of emotional labor, surface acting was significantly positively correlated with deep acting, significantly negatively correlated with natural expression, and uncorrelated with professional identity; deep acting and natural expression were significantly positively correlated with professional identity.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Teacher Support, Emotional Labor and Prof. Identity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1Mentor Support	1							
2Emotional Labor	0.20***	1						
3 Surface Acting	-0.01	0.91***	1					
4 Deep Acting	0.44***	0.55***	0.18***	1				
5Natural Expression	0.48***	0.26***	-0.11*	0.61***	1			
6 Prof. Identity	0.44***	0.27***	0.05	0.43***	0.52***	1		
7 Intrinsic Ident.	0.47***	0.25***	0.02	0.45***	0.06***	0.99***	1	
8 Extrinsic Ident.	0.36***	0.28***	0.11*	0.36***	0.42***	0.95***	0.89**	1
M±SD	4.22±0.81	3.53±0.72	2.80±1.28	4.21±0.69	4.32±0.67	4.68±1.07	4.80±1.01	4.41±1.30

3.3. Mediating Effect Analysis of Professional Identity between Mentor Teacher Support and Emotional Labor

Table 3. Mediating Effect of Prof. Identity Between Teacher Support and Emotional Labor

Regression equation(N=452)		Fit Indices			Coefficient Significance	
Outcome Variable	Predictor Variable	R	R ²	F	β	t
Emotional Labor		0.242	0.057	6.956		
	Mentor Support				0.181	4.387***
	Gender				-0.137	-1.079
	Internship Duration				0.030	1.129
	Grade				0.303	2.136*
Prof. Identity		0.441	0.195	27.040		
	Mentor Support				0.578	10.275***
	Gender				-0.174	-1.008
	Internship Duration				0.005	0.121
	Grade				0.127	0.659
Emotional Labor		0.308	0.095	9.345		
	Mentor Support				0.098	2.172*
	Prof. Identity				0.144	4.225***
	Gender				-0.112	-0.896
	Internship Duration				0.030	1.126
	Grade				0.284	2.043*

The correlation analysis showed that the correlations among mentor teacher support, emotional labor and professional identity were all significant, which met the prerequisite for mediating effect test. Model 4 of the PROCESS macro program was used to test the mediating model with gender, grade and internship duration as control variables, and the results are shown in Table 3. The results indicated that: mentor teacher support significantly predicted emotional labor ($\beta=0.181$, $p<0.001$), and the direct predictive effect of teacher support on emotional labor was still significant after adding the mediating variable ($\beta=0.098$, $p<0.05$). Teacher support significantly and positively predicted professional identity ($\beta=0.578$, $p<0.001$), and professional identity also had a significant positive predictive effect on emotional labor ($\beta=0.144$, $p<0.001$).

The bias-corrected percentile Bootstrap method (5,000 resamplings) was used to test the significance of the regression coefficients. As shown in Table 4, the confidence interval of the direct effect of mentor teacher support on emotional labor was [0.009, 0.187], which did not include 0, indicating a significant direct effect accounting for 54.14% of the total effect; the confidence interval of the indirect effect of professional identity in the relationship between mentor teacher support and emotional labor was [0.037, 0.136], which did not include 0, indicating a significant mediating effect and a partial mediating role, accounting for 45.86% of the total effect.

Table 4. Decomposition of Total, Direct and Indirect Effects

	Effect Value	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Effect Ratio
Total Effect	0.181	0.041	0.100	0.263	
Direct Effect	0.098	0.045	0.009	0.187	54.14%
Indirect Effect	0.083	0.025	0.037	0.136	45.86%

4. Discussion

4.1. Pre-service Preschool Education Teachers have a High Level of Emotional Labor

The results of this study showed that the total score of emotional labor of pre-service preschool education teachers was higher than the theoretical median (3.53 ± 0.72), indicating that the emotional labor required of pre-service teachers during internships is already at a high level. Like preschool teachers, they belong to the group with high emotional labor intensity [3]. This study also found that the score of surface acting was lower than the theoretical median (2.80 ± 1.28), and much lower than those of deep acting and natural expression, indicating that surface acting is rarely adopted. This result is basically consistent with the emotional labor status of preschool teachers [15][18]. However, some scholars believe that novice teachers are mostly surface actors and lack the ability of deep acting [31]. The difference in results is mainly due to the different educational objects and tasks. On the one hand, the innocence and undisguised emotional characteristics of young children make teachers more authentic when facing them, creating a more natural working atmosphere where there is no need to pretend to show the emotions expected by others. On the other hand, compared with other school stages, kindergarten work is extremely complicated, and a large number of childcare and teaching work requires genuine emotional investment. It is impossible to always imitate the skills of deep acting, as this would consume a lot of psychological resources. This study reveals the emotional labor strategies adopted by pre-service teachers during internships, which precisely reflects their positive attitude towards educational internships, and also means that pre-service teachers have a high level of emotional intelligence [32] to deal with various difficulties in internships.

4.2. Significant Differences in Emotional Labor of Pre-Service Preschool Education Teachers in Terms of Gender, Grade and Internship Duration

In terms of gender, there was a significant difference in the total score of emotional labor between male and female pre-service teachers, but no significant difference in the three dimensions, which is partially consistent with previous research results. Some studies have found that male student teachers are more likely to suppress their true emotions than female ones, which is considered to be influenced by social norms and criteria [33], and male kindergarten teachers are more inclined to adopt surface acting than female ones [15]. In this study, male pre-service teachers showed more emotional labor because they need to display a more calm and rational state than usual, and adapt to the kindergarten working environment with a more positive and emotional state. In terms of grade, third-year pre-service teachers adopted less surface acting and had a lower total score of emotional labor than fourth-year ones. Some scholars also found that the professional emotion of fourth-year pre-service teachers is slightly lower than that of other grades, that is, the professional emotion of pre-service teachers gradually weakens with the increase of grade [34]. The reason for this result may be that the universities investigated in this study basically start to carry out observation and internship activities from the third year, and third-year pre-service teachers have a stronger enthusiasm for kindergarten work. However, after a long period of internship in the fourth year, their emotional experiences become increasingly complex, and even a certain sense of burnout may be triggered, which is basically consistent with the finding of some researchers that "the level of teachers' emotional labor shows an upward trend with the increase of teaching seniority" [35]. Other researchers have pointed out that pre-service preschool education teachers experience more negative emotions in the early stage of internship, and positive emotions gradually increase in the middle and late stages [36]. For interns, with the enrichment of internship life and the accumulation of internship experience, teacher role behavior is gradually internalized, making their emotional expressions more in line with professional requirements, and they can regulate their emotions more freely.

4.3. Significant Correlations among Mentor Teacher Support, Professional Identity and Emotional Labor

This study found that mentor teacher support was significantly positively correlated with emotional labor, especially with deep acting and natural expression, but had no obvious correlation with surface acting, which is basically consistent with previous studies [15]. Pre-service teachers who perceive care and guidance from mentor teachers in work, interpersonal relationships and life can better adopt positive emotional adaptation methods when facing conflicts between internal and external emotional expressions. Mentor teacher support was also significantly positively correlated with professional identity, that is, the higher the teacher support, the higher the professional identity of pre-service teachers, which is also supported by previous studies [37]. It can be seen that receiving support from mentor teachers can strengthen pre-service teachers' belief in preschool education work and constantly adjust internal conflicts with their teacher identity.

4.4. Professional Identity Plays a Partial Mediating Role between Mentor Teacher Support and Emotional Labor

This study found that mentor teacher support significantly predicted the emotional labor of pre-service preschool education teachers, with the direct effect accounting for 54.14% of the total effect. After adding professional identity as a mediating variable, it played a partial mediating role in the relationship between mentor teacher support and emotional labor, accounting for 45.86% of the total effect. The study also found that mentor teacher support could positively predict deep acting and natural expression, and also indirectly and positively

influence deep acting and natural expression through professional identity. This result is supported by existing studies: support from mentor teachers is an important factor influencing the emotional transformation of pre-service teachers [38]. Insufficient teacher support obtained in practical learning scenarios will lead to a sense of frustration towards teaching work [39], and pre-service teachers' lack of identity with the teacher role will enhance their negative emotional experiences, and bring a sense of marginalization and emotional struggle [40]. It can be seen that the more support pre-service teachers receive from mentor teachers, the more they can engage in internship work, enhance their professional identity, thereby helping pre-service teachers reduce their sensitivity to negative emotions, strengthen their ability to cope with internal emotional conflicts, and achieve physical and mental harmony. Therefore, improving the professional identity of pre-service preschool education teachers and the teacher support during internships are important ways to enhance their emotional regulation ability.

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