

Professional Competency Elements and Training Paths for Preschool Teachers

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Abstract:

The lack of quality in preschool education has received widespread attention, but there are still shortcomings in the solutions to this problem. This article analyzes the professional competence elements of preschool educators, highlights innovations, and adds practical value. It points out that preschool teachers should possess good communication and collaboration skills, and at the same time, pre-service training needs to be strengthened to improve the quality of the preschool education field. Based on this, this article proposes the following suggestions: the government and kindergartens should collaborate to build a good educational environment for teachers. Moreover, teachers themselves need to enhance their abilities and value the integration of education and childcare rather than a single teaching and learning approach. This article believes that establishing a training system that covers the entire career of teachers and involves multi-party cooperation is the key to laying a solid foundation for teachers' professional development and improving the quality of preschool education.

Keywords: Preschool Education; Teaching Method; Professional Competency Elements; Integration of Care and Education

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of China's social economy and the increasing international competition, the country has put forward unprecedentedly high requirements for the early cultivation of high-quality talents. For example, the national gross enrollment rate of preschool education exceeded 91% in 2023, but the shortage of qualified preschool teachers reached hundreds of thousands. However, traditional training for preschool teachers still has its limitations. For example, it focuses more on skills than

on literacy and there is a disconnect between theory and practice. As the insufficient professional competence of preschool teachers affects the development of children's early habits and potential, 'Running preschool education well' and 'providing education for young children' have become major livelihood issues of national strategic level and common concern of the whole society. The successive issuance of policy documents such as the "Several Opinions on Deepening Reform and Standardizing Development of Preschool Education" marks a new stage of devel-

opment in China's preschool education, which is shifting from expanding in scale to focusing on "improving quality and efficiency". At the same time, the new generation of parents generally holds the concept of scientific parenting, and their desire for high-quality preschool education is becoming stronger. They also have higher expectations for the professional competence and comprehensive ability of preschool education teachers. The current preschool teacher training system in China still faces many challenges: on the one hand, the traditional training model may have problems such as emphasizing skill transmission over comprehensive literacy, and a disconnect between theory and practice. On the other hand, teachers no longer need to deal with traditional "childcare" tasks in their actual work, but also need to possess complex abilities such as observing and interpreting children, creating educational environments, promoting home-school community collaboration, implementing personalized education, and promoting their own professional development. Enhancing the overall professional level of the teaching staff will directly benefit the vast number of preschool children, lay a solid foundation for their healthy growth and lifelong development, and effectively promote the overall improvement of the quality of preschool education in China. This article will focus on the core theme of "Elements and Training Paths of Professional Competence for Preschool Education Teachers". From the perspective of teacher professional growth, this article systematically explores the integrated training path of "pre-service training, onboarding counseling, and on-the-job training", aiming to construct a modern training system that promotes theoretical and practical cycles, external support, and independent development in coordination. This article clarifies the dimensions of professional competence elements (teacher ethics and philosophy, integration of care and education, observation and evaluation, curriculum innovation, etc.); define the research scope (covering public and private kindergartens, preschool teachers in urban and rural areas). The research methods are based on literature review, national multi-regional preschool teacher surveys and typical kindergarten case analysis. The goal is to provide a valuable reference for the construction of a high-quality, professional, and innovative preschool education teacher team in China.

2. Professional Competence Elements of Preschool Education Teachers

2.1 The Cornerstone of Career Development

2.1.1 Basic literacy

Professional competence is the soul and cornerstone of

the profession of preschool teachers, and it is the fundamental direction that determines the value of educational behavior [1]. The general competence of teachers lays the foundation for their professional development, including teacher ethics and professional philosophy, psychological communication and empathy, as well as communication, collaboration, and team cohesion. Teacher ethics and professional concepts are reflected in the fact that qualified preschool teachers must possess a child-centered educational philosophy, a scientific approach to childcare, and noble professional ethics, which constitute the core and commander-in-chief of all abilities. Specifically, it is manifested in the correct "view of children", which regards young children as active learners with independent personalities, enormous potential, and unique developmental rhythms, rather than passive knowledge receivers.

2.1.2 core professional competence

There is also a scientific "view of education", which deeply understands the principles of "games as the basic activity" and "the combination of care and education", and respects individual differences of young children. This concept ultimately manifests as noble professional ethics, selfless love for early childhood education, sincere care for every child, as well as a high sense of responsibility and integrity in teaching. Surveys show that the ability of integrating care and education is listed as a core essential competence by 85% of kindergarten principals. Without a solid foundation of professional ethics and philosophy, exceptional skills may lose their direction. Psychological communication skills and empathy are the connecting bridge, manifested in good observation and understanding of children's behavior, effective teacher-student interaction and communication, and self-emotional management and adjustment. The mental state of preschool education targets is still in its infancy, and language expression is limited. Therefore, teachers need to have keen psychological insight and profound empathy. They should not only be able to understand children's speech, but also understand their inner emotional needs and underlying reasons through facial expressions, actions, and behavioral works. This enables teachers to timely comfort frustrated children, understand the motivation behind 'problematic behavior', and provide appropriate support. Empathy becomes the foundation for establishing a safe and trusting teacher-student relationship and is a prerequisite for effective education.

2.1.3 expansion ability

Communication, collaboration, and team cohesion are reflected in the ability of preschool teachers to establish partnerships with parents, collaborate with colleagues, and integrate resources through campus communication to jointly complete childcare tasks. Modern preschool

education is not a solitary effort. Internal teachers need to establish efficient and harmonious collaborative relationships with colleagues such as class partners and caregivers to jointly plan courses, handle class affairs, and form an educational synergy; Externally, it is necessary to attach importance to communication and collaboration among parents, translate professional educational concepts into language that parents can understand, and establish a home school partnership through home visits, parent meetings, daily communication, and multiple channels to promote the development of young children. In addition, effective communication with community management departments is also indispensable, and this multidimensional communication and collaboration ability is key to integrating resources and optimizing the educational environment. Besides, adding new-era competency elements is essential. For instance, using educational APPs to design activities, psychological support ability to respond to children's behavioral problems.

2.2 Focusing Ability: Showcasing Professional Depth

If general ability determines whether a teacher can “stand firm on the podium”, then focusing ability determines whether a teacher can “stand firm on the podium”, reflecting their irreplaceable professionalism.

2.2.1 Core of work

Childcare refers to the protection and nurturing of children, specifically referring to the health care, safety protection, and daily care work implemented by preschool education institutions for children aged 0-6 in the modern education system, including both physiological care and psychological development training. ‘Education’ is the combination of teaching and nurturing. Education is the fundamental means of socialization, modernization, and continuous self-improvement for individuals. The function of education arises from both internal and external factors, and is useful to the outside world through internalization. The internal is the essence, and the external is the function. The core professional competence of preschool education teachers is reflected in the close integration of “protection” and “teaching”, which are difficult to separate and blend in practice [2]. The integration of preschool education and education is regarded as the highest level of preschool education, which means that “protection” includes “teaching”, and “teaching” also includes “protection”. Infusing educational content in the process of “conservation”, such as not only ensuring that children are fully fed during meals, but also allowing them to learn nutrition knowledge, understand food, practice using tableware, cultivate the habit of not being picky or wasteful, and learn polite language before and after meals,

are all excellent opportunities. The washing process is not only about washing hands and face, but also involves learning the steps of hand washing, understanding the importance of hygiene, and cultivating awareness of queuing and waiting rules. At the same time, “conservation” is also included in “education” activities. When organizing physical exercise such as running, jumping, climbing, etc., for children, teachers should pay attention to the amount of exercise and sweat, remind them to add or remove clothing to replenish water promptly, and ensure the safety of the activity environment and equipment. Teachers not only scientifically take care of children's daily life activities, such as diet, sleep, and washing, but also are good at capturing educational opportunities, such as introducing mathematical concepts into dressing and shoes through pre-meal preparation to cultivate self-care abilities. This ability requires teachers to quickly transform children's development knowledge and healthcare knowledge into intelligent actions in specific contexts, achieving the goal of “teaching with protection” and making education more practical. The above methods can effectively integrate “conservation” and “education”, reflecting the teaching practice and wisdom of preschool education teachers.

2.2.2 Observation and evaluation ability: basis for decision making

High-quality education begins with precise observation. Teachers need to have a professional perspective, purposefully and systematically record the behavior and performance of young children in games and life activities, and have high requirements for observation ability. The purpose of observation is not to label young children, but to interpret the developmental level, interests, and learning styles behind their behavior. Evaluation and analysis based on observation records are completed by teachers and serve as a scientific basis for adjusting environmental design activities for individual guidance. This process connects the real and possible development of young children and is a professional symbol of teachers' transformation from experiential to research-oriented.

2.2.3 Curriculum development and innovation: professional sublimation

This ability tests the personal qualities of teachers and is difficult to achieve in a hurry. Under the guidance of the “Guidelines for Preschool Education” and the “Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6”, teachers are no longer passive executors of the curriculum, but active developers and creators of localized classroom-based curriculum [3]. This ability requires teachers to flexibly and creatively generate theme activity project courses based on a deep understanding of local resources and the development needs of children's interests in the class. It integrates teachers' professional knowledge, ar-

tistic literacy resources, integration ability, and reflection ability, and is the highest manifestation of teachers' professional autonomy, as well as the source of vitality and suitability for the kindergarten curriculum.

3. Current Difficulties in the Cultivation and Development of Preschool Education Teachers

With the analysis of the connotation and importance of professional competence standards, there are many shortcomings in the evaluation system of teaching methods and practical links in the current pre-service training curriculum for preschool teachers [4]. Researchers propose to carry out pre-service training for preschool teachers based on professional competence standards, so as to effectively improve students' practical ability, professional literacy, and innovation ability, and provide high-quality professional talents for the preschool education industry [5]. Although people have a clear understanding of the ideal teacher competency landscape, in reality, its cultivation and development face many severe challenges.

3.1 Training System

Many preschool education majors in higher education institutions focus on the systematic transmission of theoretical knowledge, with educational principles of child developmental psychology dominating. However, the quality of the supporting practical links is clearly insufficient. Students' internship time is short and concentrated, and there is a lack of experienced teachers to provide continuous guidance during the internship process. As a result, interns often become bystanders or caregivers, making it difficult for them to apply theory to complex educational practices. This situation creates an awkward situation where students know what they do but do not know why.

3.2 Resource Allocation

The excessively high teacher-to-child ratio restricts the ability of teachers to perform and becomes a major weakness. When facing dozens of young children, maintaining basic safety and order is a huge challenge for teachers. The previously mentioned ability to focus on observation, evaluation, individualized guidance, curriculum innovation, etc., has become a luxury item that cannot be ignored. Teachers are in a state of high load and intense stress for a long time, and their professional burnout is obvious. Although they have the willingness, it is difficult to achieve professional development.

3.3 Social Environment

With the widespread mismatch between the labor input

and salary of preschool education teachers, the problem has become more prominent among non-regular teachers and teachers in private kindergartens. The low salary makes it difficult to attract outstanding talent to enter the early childhood education industry, and also leads to a large number of backbone teachers being lost. The traditional society's bias against "playing with children" has resulted in a lack of respect for professionalism and irreplaceability, which further undermines the professional pride and happiness of teachers, and thus affects their professional satisfaction [6]. Also, low social recognition reduces the professional attractiveness of preschool teachers, leading to less inflow of high-quality talents and exacerbating insufficient training quality. Rural preschool teachers face resource scarcity, while urban preschool teachers focus on professional burnout and competitive pressure.

3.4 Evaluation Mechanism

Many kindergarten teacher evaluation systems exhibit a utilitarian tendency, focusing on visible and quantifiable outcomes, such as the success of skill competitions, public classes, and the creation of visual effects in the environment. This evaluation orientation leads teachers to devote a lot of energy to performance work, neglecting core tasks such as high-quality interaction with children and meticulous observation and recording in daily childcare. As a result, the direction of teacher professional development has been alienated.

4. Systematically Construct the Training Path for Preschool Education Teachers

In response to the difficulties encountered in the professional abilities and qualities of preschool education teachers, it is necessary to establish a three-dimensional training path that is coordinated and linked by the government, society, training institutions, and kindergartens.

4.1 Pre-Employment Training

Preschool teachers need to lay a solid foundation, and pre-service training is the basis for them to take on this position. Therefore, in the process of becoming a preschool teacher, attention should be paid to the cultivation of theoretical and practical education [7]. Firstly, attention should be paid to curriculum reform, and a "theory practice integration" curriculum system can be constructed. Increase the proportion and duration of practical courses (practical courses account for no less than 40%, total internship duration no less than 6 months), and integrate internships and apprenticeships throughout the entire

university learning stage, gradually progressing from perceptual internships and assisted internships to on-the-job internships. For example, a normal university shortened the adaptation period of new preschool teachers by 30% through „kindergarten-university co-constructed training bases“. Secondly, it should pay attention to the innovation of teaching modes, and vigorously promote the “case teaching” and “project-based learning” modes, introducing real educational situations into the classroom and allowing preschool teachers to construct knowledge in the process of analyzing and solving practical problems. Finally, a dual mentor system can be implemented (university mentors are responsible for theoretical guidance, with no less than 2 communications per month; kindergarten mentors are responsible for practical teaching, with daily follow-up feedback), where theoretical mentors from universities and practical mentors from kindergartens jointly provide guidance. This ensures that preschool teachers receive timely and professional feedback and guidance during the practical process, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

4.2 Onboarding Training

It includes 6 core modules such as class management, home-kindergarten communication, emergency handling, with a passing rate of 80% required. Onboarding training can assist novice preschool teachers and facilitate a smooth transition. The first year of employment is a critical period for teachers’ professional growth, requiring systematic support. Firstly, a standardized system can be established to establish a one-year, systematic, and rigorously assessed onboarding training system, which will serve as an important basis for regularization and grading. For example, design hierarchical on-the-job training (novice teachers focus on practical skills, backbone teachers on curriculum innovation, principals on teacher management). At the same time, establish an evaluation mechanism (measure training effects through classroom observation, children’s development assessment, and parent satisfaction surveys). Secondly, a mentor-mentee pairing model is implemented to equip new teachers with experienced backbone teachers as “mentors” to provide hands-on guidance in emotional support, class management, parental work, activity design, and other practical aspects. At the kindergarten level, the kindergarten should fully support the education of preschool teachers, jointly create an inclusive and supportive college culture, allow new teachers to make mistakes in their attempts, and help them reflect and improve through collective lesson preparation, teaching, and research activities, and smoothly achieve the role transition from students to professional teachers.

4.3 System Guarantee

The government and kindergartens need to collaborate and optimize the ecological environment for the development of preschool education teachers [8]. At the government level, it is possible to strengthen macro coordination and investment in the field of preschool education. With the rapid development of preschool education, there is a problem of too many teachers and too few positions. The increase and implementation of the number of positions has become the key to stabilizing the teaching staff. The government dynamically increases the number of teachers in public kindergartens and guides private kindergartens to improve their salary treatment through financial subsidies and special rewards, ensuring that their income is not lower than the average level of local civil servants, so that teachers can teach with peace of mind [9]. For example, financial subsidies for private preschool teachers are issued at 30% of the local minimum wage standard, linked to teaching assessments. Next, the government can strictly control the teacher ratio, introduce and strictly implement kindergarten teacher allocation standards, effectively reduce class sizes, and provide basic conditions for teachers to implement high-quality and personalized education. For example, formulate regional adaptation plans (underdeveloped areas increase central transfer payment efforts, first-tier cities focus on housing subsidies and career development incentives) and establish emergency mechanisms (e.g. cross-regional teacher deployment, short-term substitute training programs). Finally, optimize the evaluation orientation, develop a scientific teacher evaluation guide for the field of preschool education, guide kindergartens to establish a developmental evaluation system centered on “daily quality of care and education” and “real development of children”, weaken utilitarian evaluation, and encourage teachers to focus on educating students. From a societal and kindergarten perspective, it is necessary to create a micro environment that respects teachers and values education.

Preschool education is a subject that has only been gradually valued in recent years, and urgently needs to enhance its social identity. The media should strengthen the promotion of the professional value of preschool education and the deeds of excellent teachers, enhance public understanding and respect for teachers’ professionalism, and elevate their social status. In addition, building a learning community is also very important. Kindergartens should become the main battlefield for teachers’ professional development. By establishing a school-based teaching and research system, teacher studios, research groups, etc., the kindergarten will be transformed into a “learning organization”, stimulating teachers’ intrinsic development motivation and achieving a transition from “I want to develop” to “I want to devel-

op". Finally, as leaders in this field, kindergartens should ensure the professional autonomy of preschool teachers. Kindergarten management should trust teachers and give them greater autonomy and flexibility in curriculum implementation, environment creation, and other aspects, providing a soil for their curriculum development and innovation [10].

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes that the problem of insufficient ability and declining teaching quality of preschool education teachers in recent years, and proposes corresponding solutions (preschool teachers need to have "basic-core-expansion" three-dimensional competencies, relying on "pre-service-onboarding-on-the-job" multi-subject collaborative training) as well as promising development prospects for this field (e.g., in-depth integration of digital technology and preschool teacher training, research on targeted training models for rural preschool teachers). But this article does not involve the training of teachers in 0-3-year-old nursery institutions. Preschool teachers should pay attention to cultivating their professional abilities, consolidating their theoretical foundation, and developing various skills.

The government should carry out macroeconomic regulation and work together with kindergarten micro regulation to build a good educational environment for preschool teachers and solve existing problems. To continuously develop the field of preschool education, break the existing traditional model, create new educational methods, and provide good educational guarantees for children. For example, conducting "digital care and education training" intervention experiments, tracking results for 1 year, setting priorities based on gaps (first focusing on the problem of insufficient resources for rural preschool teachers, then promoting personalized training) and proposing transformation paths (e.g., cooperating with education departments to incorporate training programs into the preschool teacher qualification certification system).

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